NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 08253104 1

NAS
Ellis

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/rightingwrong00elli

RIGHTING THE WRONG

BY

EDWARD S. ELLIS

AUTHOR OF "LOG CABIN" SERIES, "DEERFOOT" SERIES,
"WYOMING" SERIES, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

PHILADELPHIA
HENRY T. COATES & CO.

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
ASTOR LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R

Copyright, 1894,
by
The Merriam Company.

RIGHTING THE WRONG.

CHAPTER I.

48X1095

I INTIMATED at the close of the preceding story in this series, entitled "Honest Ned," that I would have something more to tell you about Ned Melton, who played such a creditable part in the incidents of that story; for I am sure I am not mistaken in believing that you feel an interest in the youth, who possessed the courage of his convictions, and was one of those rare youths that is not afraid to do right under any and all circumstances.

When the Maiden Lane firm of Shipman & Gumbridge learned the whole history of Ned's charity, kindness, integrity, and manliness, under a most trying ordeal, they felt that something more than mere thanks was due him. His salary at the time was the small one of ten dollars a week, not because his employers were unwilling to give more, for they were anxious to make it the equal of Ashton Gibbons's, the leading clerk, who received just four times that sum; but, as you will recall, Ned was an orphan, and a ward

of Colonel Marcellus Bainbridge, a stern old martinet, who had his own ideas about boys, and who would brook no opposition. He insisted that the smaller wages was sufficient for any young man in the situation of his nephew, out of which the lad had to pay only his board, amounting to three dollars weekly, and his clothing, which could readily be brought within his stipend.

But need I dwell upon the peculiar hardship of Ned's situation? It seems unnecessary, but I must do so in as few words as possible. We have plenty of bad weather here in New York; and though it was a pleasure for the athletic youth to walk from his home to the store and back again in the afternoon, there were times when storm and snow and sleet compelled him to make use of the surface or elevated cars. The fare is small, but it amounts to something in the course of a week. Then there was the noon lunch, to miss which is a hardship to a strong, growing youth. It cost little, but "many a little makes a muckle," as the old proverb goes.

He found that by the strictest economy, by making his noonday "bites" as light as possible (and he suffered the pangs of hunger oftener than you would suppose, frequently going without anything at all in the way of food in the middle of the day), by walking, even when the weather was stormy, by the utmost care with his clothing, he could bring his weekly expenses to a fig-

ure very little, if any, more than four dollars. This left six dollars, out of which he had to provide himself with clothes and meet other expenses, of which it is impossible to make a list; for it was necessary that he should always present a pleasing appearance, and save up enough funds to pay for his summer outing of two weeks, and dispense the little charities which daily appeal to one's sympathies in a great city like the metropolis of our country.

It was this admirable side of Ned Melton's character that played havoc with his financial matters during that summer in which occurred the incidents already told. He voluntarily shortened his stay at the seashore that he might be with poor Wash Fulmer, who lay on his death-bed, and from his scanty savings went more than one dollar to buy delicacies for the stricken lad, and to help the impoverished mother after the boy was laid in his grave. The inevitable consequence was that, when Ned entered upon his duties in the store at the close of his summer vacation, he was in debt for the first time in his life. Not only that, but he was involved to the extent that he saw no way of relief without the increase in salary which his employers wished to give to him. Nearly three years must pass before he would reach his majority and become his own master. If he lived to see that time, he would not only be free to receive whatever he could earn, but would come into the possession

of a considerable amount of money. Three years, however, is a long time for one in his situation to wait; and it is no wonder that when he cast his eyes ahead, as he often did, he felt a shrinking of heart and depression of spirits that never ought to have come to him, or rather for which there never should have been the cause..

I have told elsewhere how his employers were so impressed by the injustice of his guardian's sternness, that an appeal was made to him to permit a moderate increase. Being met with a brusque refusal, and a broad intimation by Colonel Bainbridge that it was none of their business, they proposed to Ned that he should accept the increase without the knowledge of his guardian. But Ned's sense of honor would not permit this course. Much as he wanted and needed the extra compensation, he could not stoop to any subterfuge to obtain it. Then Mr. Shipman offered to loan Ned five hundred dollars for three years, charging him legal interest for the same. The youth came very near accepting this offer; but, when he sat down to write his promissory note, the conviction that it was only another form of deception was so strong, that he refused. It was the same fine strain of honor and high regard for truthfulness that led him resolutely to refuse to borrow from any of his acquaintances, who would have been glad to help him. To him, there was but one course that was honorable and right: that was to live up to the wishes of his uncle, in spirit as well as in letter.

Ned was in this distressful state, and meditating a direct appeal to him, when the latter proposed one evening that he should accompany him to the lecture by Stanley the great explorer. The youth accepted the invitation with delight, for he had been longing for the privilege ever since learning that the treat was to be given in New York. Then, too, it would serve to wean his mind, for a time at least, from the distressing anxiety caused by his financial straits. Accordingly, he went with his uncle; and among all the numerous auditors that evening there was none more delighted and charmed than our young friend. He resolved that, if he lived to come into the possession of his own, he would devote a considerable portion of it to just such treats as this.

Colonel Bainbridge insisted that on every Saturday night his nephew should hand three dollars to him, that amount being due for his board, lodging, and washing. The old soldier often reminded him that he was securing all these very cheaply; and, in a certain sense, it cannot be denied that such was the fact. Besides this, Ned was charged nothing for his sitting in church, and his dues as a member of the Y. M. C. A. were regularly paid by his guardian. But, on the Saturday evening succeeding Stanley's lecture, his uncle, when receiving his three dollars, said, —

"There's another dollar coming to me."

"How is that?" asked the surprised youth.

"One dollar for the lecture."

"But — but — I understood you invited me to go with you."

"So I did," was the crisp reply; "but I didn't invite myself to pay for your ticket."

Ned's heart sank, for he had paid four dollars that afternoon of his indebtedness, meaning to keep three dollars to see him through the week. His lips moved with the trembling protest; but he was proud, and he forced back the words before they escaped him. The stern uncle was standing by his desk, looking expectantly at him, and plainly waiting for the other dollar. With hardly a moment's hesitation, Ned passed it over to him. He said nothing, but his thoughts were busy.

"Next week I won't ride a block on a street-car or on the elevated; I won't eat any lunch, or buy so much as a sandwich; that will leave me thirty-three and one-third cents for each day, not counting Sundays. Maybe," he added grimly, "I will find a thousand dollars on the street."

"That makes it right," remarked Colonel Bainbridge as he took the proffered dollar; "there are not many boys as favored as you, and I hope you appreciate it, Edmund."

CHAPTER II.

Ned Melton was on the point of protestation, for his whole nature revolted at the assumption of his uncle that the course he was pursuing was a magnanimous one toward him. This was not the first time, by a good many, that he had reminded the youth of his obligations. On such occasions the nephew generally bit his lips and held his peace. He could not forget that that loved mother, before she died, had begged him to be respectful and obedient to her brother, who thus became his guardian; and it was the memory of those never-to-be-forgotten last words of the blessed departed that held him mute while a tempest was raging within his breast.

Some nights later, when in the library, a servant brought in a letter for his uncle. As he picked it up, Ned recognized the familiar envelope, with its business address in the upper left-hand corner, that was used by his firm. Instinctively he suspected what was coming.

Colonel Bainbridge adjusted his eyeglasses, sat down in his chair so that the full light came over his shoulder, and opening the missive, began reading it. While doing so, Ned stood a few paces away carefully

studying his countenance. He saw the shaggy eyebrows contract into a scowl, and the left thumb and forefinger, which were pinching the chin and lower lip, slowly closed and unclosed, in a way peculiar to the colonel when displeased. Then a "Hump!" followed, and hardly taking time to read the conclusion, he exclaimed, —

"That's an insult! yes, an insult! Did you have anything to do with that, young man?"

"I have no knowledge what you refer to," replied Ned respectfully, though half angrily; for, as I said, he suspected what it was that had disturbed his guardian.

"I don't know whether to believe you or not; but I'll read it to you, that you may share my indignation, provided you are not in collusion with those fellows."

Ned's face flushed, for this was the first time his uncle had implied a doubt of his truthfulness; but that uncle, unaware that he had just inflicted the worst kind of an insult himself, proceeded to read, with many expressions of resentment, impatience, and anger, the following: —

DEAR COLONEL, — We beg that you will not be offended if we repeat a request we made some time ago, which was declined by you. Since then we have become more impressed than ever with the worth of your nephew. The record he has made with us has caused us to promote him to a position tenfold more responsible than before. He has had charge for the past two weeks of the sale and delivery of diamonds in this city and Brooklyn. He has frequently carried with

him stones worth fifty thousand dollars. His tact and courteous manner have brought us sales to the extent of more than twice what we expected, and we expected more from him than from any one else.

Permit us to say that if these sales had been made on commission, as is the rule with some houses, his salary would have amounted to more than a hundred dollars a week. He certainly earned that amount; but knowing your wishes, we have paid him only the pitiful sum of ten dollars, well aware, too, that no persuasion of ours could have induced him to accept a penny more, so long as he had not your consent.

Having briefly stated the situation, we are sure you will willingly permit us to make his salary from this time forward twenty-five dollars a week. We need not add what you know as well as we, that, no matter what Edmund's salary should be, it could never work harm to him. He has no bad habits, does not smoke nor use tobacco in any form, does not know the taste of liquor, and, meager as is his pay, expends a portion of it in intelligent charity.

Confident of receiving your acquiescence in this proposed increase in the salary of your nephew, we beg to subscribe ourselves,

Your obedient servants,

SHIPMAN & GUMBRIDGE.

As Colonel Bainbridge approached the end of this letter, he read faster and louder; his face became crimson, and the signature was emitted like the discharge of a rifle, accompanied by a contemptuous fling of the paper on the floor at his feet.

"That settles it!" he added, snatching off his eyeglasses, banging himself back in the chair, shutting his lips tight, and glaring at his nephew, who was standing in the middle of the floor with his gaze fixed upon him.

"Settles what?" asked Ned, swallowing a lump in his throat.

"Your services with Shipman & Gumbridge; they are no gentlemen."

"Do you call them no gentlemen because they express their belief that I am honest and am doing the best I can for them?"

Ned felt that a crisis had come, and he determined to stand his ground.

"I told them," said the colonel, his face growing almost purple with wrath, "at the time I placed you in their charge, that your salary should be ten dollars a week until you reached your majority, at which time I would wash my hands of you, and you were at liberty to make a fool of yourself. They may give you their whole business then for all I care. They assented to the arrangement; but you hadn't been there long, before that Shipman had the impudence to call here and suggest that [illegible] ed."

"Then, I believe, was after I had been with them a year and the pay of the other clerks had been raised."

"That hasn't anything to do with the question!" thundered Colonel Bainbridge; "it was a clear intimation that they knew better than I what was best for you. I meant to end the matter then for all time, and supposed I had done so. Ignoring all that I said, here comes this insulting letter, in which they take it for granted that I will write myself down an ass, by sending them word that I agree to all they propose. I'll see them hanged first!"

"I will tell them in the morning that you cannot grant what they request, and I will continue along at the same rate," said Ned, hoping thus to parry the blow he dreaded, and to lead his guardian to forget the threat just made of taking him from their employ.

"You won't do anything of the kind! I won't answer such an insulting letter, but if Shipman or Gumbridge was here I would kick him out of the house. You will walk down there to-morrow and tell them you are no longer in their service. I will find you a situation somewhere else, if you do not know enough to find it yourself."

"I hope you will not put yourself to that trouble."

"Didn't you have anything to do with writing that letter?" asked the irate colonel, spurning it with his foot.

"I have answered you that I knew nothing about it."

"Humph! It isn't likely they would have the impudence to write anything like that unless you asked it."

"Do you believe I am lying, uncle?" asked Ned, his face growing white with emotion; "do you believe I ever told you an untruth?"

"I don't doubt it"—

"Good-night, sir!"

Ned Melton dared not trust himself any further. He turned abruptly on his heel and walked toward the door.

"Stop!" shouted his guardian; "come back here, I command you! Edmund, do you hear me? *What!*"

But, for the first time in the boy's life, he disobeyed his guardian. He walked straight from the library, hurried to his room, shut and locked the door, and flung himself on his bed, where he burst into tears, sobbing like a child of half his years.

Colonel Bainbridge, sitting bolt upright in his chair, and staring at the door through which his nephew had passed, was speechless for a few minutes.

"I ought to cowhide him! I'll do it, too, in the morning! He thinks because he is eighteen years old that he is too big to be disciplined. He's very touchy about his honor. Flares up because I tell him I suspect he had to do with writing that letter. He needs taking down a peg or two, and he'll get it bright and early to-morrow."

Strange that amid all his tempestuous emotions, there came not the shadow of a suspicion to the soldier that he was doing his nephew a wrong! But it was a fact. As I have shown, he was one of the most rigid martinets that ever wore the uniform of the regular army. During the great civil war he was known as an officer who never allowed his sense of justice to be softened by mercy. If a deserter was caught, no matter how palliating the circumstances, he ordered him shot off-hand, despite the prayers of stricken mothers and pleading

sisters. He punished derelictions of duty with an unsparing hand, and always insisted that half the inefficiency of the army was due to the milk and water policy of many of the commanders. Lighting a cigar, Colonel Bainbridge leaned back in his chair and puffed vigorously. His anger, instead of cooling, grew more intense.

"I have been too indulgent with him. After this, he shall pay five dollars a week for board and lodging, and I shall make no allowance for the time lost in hunting another situation. I ought to go to his room now and chastise him."

He sprang from his seat and walked hastily to the door. With his hand on the knob, however, he paused, looked back, and then returned with the same angry stride to his seat.

"No, I'll wait till morning; it will do him good to think over his disobedience and disrespect. When a boy realizes that he deserves chastisement, it does him good. He is angry now, and in no mood to appreciate justice! I'll wait till he becomes as cool as I am!"

The colonel retired at a late hour, and the first thought on opening his eyes in the morning was of his nephew. Not a gentle or palliating motion stirred his heart. He was as sternly resolved as ever to punish him severely.

"I'll wait till he appears at the breakfast-table," he

concluded, compressing his thin lips; "I will accept no apology, for he defied my authority, and walked out of the room when I commanded him to stop. He may apologize after chastisement, but not before."

The soldier took his place at the breakfast-table, but his nephew did not appear. The colonel waited ten, fifteen minutes, and then, unable to restrain his impatience longer, directed the servant to go to Edmund's apartment and tell him to come to the dining-room at once, for it was already late. The servant was gone but a few minutes, when he appeared with a scared countenance.

"Please, sir, Master Edmund is not in his room."

"What!" thundered Colonel Bainbridge.

"He is not in his room, sir."

"He has actually dared to sneak off, has he?" roared the soldier, shoving back his chair, flinging his napkin on the table, and springing to his feet; "I'll see for myself."

Reaching the sleeping apartment of his nephew, he pushed back the door, which was silently ajar, and glared around. That which first arrested his attention was the appearance of the bed, which showed it had not been occupied during the night. Then he snatched open the door of the wardrobe, as though he expected to find his nephew hiding there. His clothing was gone, as was the valise which he generally took with him on his vacations.

"What! he has run away, eh, the scoundrel! Ah" —

On the bureau lay a folded piece of paper, with the penciled name of Colonel Bainbridge on the outside. With an odd feeling, the irascible soldier picked it up and unfolded it.

DEAR UNCLE, —

Good-by. I am sorry to leave you, but I cannot stay under your roof any longer. I thank you for the many kindnesses you have shown me in the past, but you declared last night that I should no longer serve in the employ of Shipman & Gumbridge, two as good friends as I have in the world. I would submit to that, but you told me you believed I had uttered an untruth to you. No person in the world ever accused me of that before, and it is more than I can stand. I, therefore, leave your house, and you need never expect to see me again. I ask your pardon if I have ever done you a wrong, and my heart is breaking at the thought of the manner in which I am leaving you, but I think it is best. So, once more, good-by.

EDMUND.

CHAPTER III.

THERE was mild surprise felt by Shipman & Gumbridge the following day when ten o'clock arrived without Ned Melton showing up. No uneasiness for a time came to either of the employers or the clerks, Gibbons and McCutcheon, both of whom were in the store.

It has been shown that young Melton's duties had been changed since the incidents recorded in our previous story. He was now sent out with valuable lots of diamonds to sell and deliver to such customers as he secured. He rarely had less than twenty thousand dollars' worth in his charge, and not infrequently the value was double that. The rule which he followed up to this day, was to report in the morning, and to bring in, late in the afternoon, the result of his work. Such diamonds as he brought back unsold were placed in the safe over night, to be taken out again, perhaps with others, on the following morning, when he started on his rounds. As nearly as could be ascertained, the precious stones in his possession on the preceding day aggregated in value about twenty-five thousand dollars. He had not turned them in at night; but nothing was

thought of that, as it was known he intended to make a journey to Ball & Black's and to Tiffany's up town, and it was supposed that he had not got back before the store closed. True, he might have opened the door and safe, knowing the latter combination; but Colonel Bainbridge owned a strong safe, in which the gems would be considered safe for one night at least. Then, too, as you doubtless know, the diamond dealers in Maiden Lane are wofully careless about such matters, and the wonder is that losses are not greater and more frequent. When eleven o'clock arrived, Mr. Shipman began to grow uneasy. He reflected on the many desperate characters to be found in certain parts of the city at all times, and asked himself whether it was probable any harm could have befallen his favorite clerk.

"If there is anything wrong," said his partner, Mr. Gumbridge, "his uncle would have sent us word. He has decided to complete some transaction before coming to the store."

But Mr. Shipman was only partly satisfied. He waited some minutes longer, out of deference to his friend's views, but before it was yet noon, asked McCutcheon to go to Ned's home, and ask about him. The clerk was glad to do so; for somehow or other a fear had been growing in his breast for the last two hours, that something was amiss with his friend. His anxiety

was such, that he called a cab on the outside, and drove with all haste to Colonel Bainbridge's handsome residence. The colonel was at home, and in anything but an amiable mood. He was angry with his nephew, and fully as angry with his employers for the part they had acted. Naturally a portion of his resentment was reflected on the clerk who presented himself before him; for he knew by sight the two employees of the wealthy firm of Maiden Lane.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded, before McCutcheon had time to explain his business.

"Your nephew has not reported at the store this morning, and Mr. Shipman asked me to call and inquire about him."

"He did, eh? Well, you may present my compliments to Mr. Shipman, and tell him I know nothing about my nephew."

"Is — is he not here?" asked the astonished McCutcheon, the old dreadful misgiving sinking deeper in his heart.

"Haven't I told you I know nothing about him? Isn't that enough?" roared the colonel.

"But, pardon me, I am much distressed. When did he leave?"

"He ran away last night; he concluded he knew what was better for him than his guardian, so he packed up his duds and cleared out."

"But — but — did he leave no word?" faltered McCutcheon, so overcome by the news that he lost his usual coolness.

"That's none of your business; isn't it sufficient, as I asked you a minute ago, to say that he went away? He stole off without my knowledge, though he left a few written words for me; and I don't know nor care where he is."

"But he had a lot of diamonds with him," said the clerk, hardly conscious of what he was saying, but vaguely seeking time in which to gather more information about his missing friend.

"What of that? He stole them! You'll never see them again. A lad or man that will lie as my nephew does will steal and commit any crime. I am not surprised to learn that he is a thief; I don't wonder that he has proven one, with such employers and associates."

"Edmund Melton is no more a thief than you are, sir" —

Luckily for James McCutcheon the door behind him was open. Had it not been, Colonel Bainbridge would have throttled him; but the clerk was fully recovered from his recent illness, and, by his spryness, succeeded in getting out of the house before the furious ex-officer could lay hands on him. As may be supposed, the report which he brought back to the store caused a feeling of consternation on the part of his employers

and Ashton Gibbons. It was some minutes before they could discuss the situation calmly. The clerks insisted that no matter how bad matters looked for Melton, no temptation in the world could make him a thief.

"He would starve to death before taking a penny belonging to any one else."

"Such was my opinion," said Mr. Gumbridge; "but alas! in whom is it safe to put implicit trust? I believe that every man and woman will fall before a certain degree of temptation. The difference between the doing of wrong and doing right is one of circumstances. A man is good simply because he hasn't been tempted to the yielding point; I never stole a pin in life, but I daren't say that there might not be a possible combination of circumstances that would make me steal five or a hundred dollars; I believe the same is true of each of you, of Shipman here, and of every one."

"I don't subscribe to any such doctrine," said McCutcheon firmly; "for if that were true, then there would be no just men in the sight of God, for he judges from men's motives rather than their deeds. Do you believe Ned Melton has run away and taken those diamonds with him?"

The somewhat cynical gentleman shrugged his shoulders.

"I would willingly give the value of the gems to believe otherwise. I don't say young Melton's a thief;

but, recalling how many good men have fallen in this very town, I simply suspend judgment until the truth becomes known. Shipman, why don't you say something?" he abruptly asked, turning toward his partner. The latter sighed deeply, and shook his head.

"I am too distressed to think coherently. I will consult with Detective Blowitz, who has helped to straighten out more than one problem of that kind."

Anticipating events for a brief while, let us glance at the advertising columns of a succeeding issue of the *Jeweler's Journal.* Prominently displayed were these words: —

"WANTED, FOR GRAND LARCENY,

EDMUND MELTON,

18 or 19 years old; height, 5 feet 10 inches; well dressed, with dark eyes and hair.

A liberal reward will be paid for information leading to his arrest and recovery of goods stolen, which consist of unmounted diamonds.

SHIPMAN & GUMBRIDGE,
Importers of Diamonds,
Nos. —— Maiden Lane,
New York."

"Who inserted that atrocious advertisement?" demanded the indignant Shipman of his partner, the instant he learned of the fact.

"I haven't the remotest idea," replied Mr. Gumbridge; "it is an outrage to append our name to it, when neither you nor I would do it for ten times the value of the diamonds."

CHAPTER IV.

Mr. Shipman's first supposition upon seeing the description of Ned Melton in the *Jeweler's Journal*, with the statement that he was wanted for grand larceny, and that a reward would be paid for his detection and arrest, was that his partner was responsible for the notice. He was so indignant, that, had such been the case, the unbroken friendship of years would have come to an end then and there. But he did his friend an injustice, though the cynicism expressed by Mr. Gumbridge perhaps justified the suspicion. But the elder was hardly less angered than his friend by the belief that he had inserted the advertisement.

However, it was an easy matter to find out who the party was, since he made no effort to deny it, and the firm of diamond brokers had a clear right to know. The publishers of the paper informed them that Colonel Bainbridge had ordered the insertion of the notice to be continued indefinitely. All that Shipman & Gumbridge could do was to forbid the use of their name to the offer of reward, and that they lost no time in doing. This discovery intensified their wrath. Until

then they had felt certain that Colonel Bainbridge's family pride would prevent him from doing anything to let the public know of his nephew's fall. They thought it likely he would make good the loss, rather than have the youth hunted down and punished. But he could never forgive that defiance of his authority. He would go to any length to punish his nephew for that.

Shipman & Gumbridge were not members of the Jewelers' Alliance; and whatever steps, therefore, were taken by them to discover the missing Ned Melton would have to be at their own expense, and they did not regret that such was the case. The first thing done was to secure Detective Blowitz, who sat talking with the two partners, one evening in the store, long after business hours and the departure of Gibbons and McCutcheon. To the question what he thought of the matter, the sagacious officer replied, —

"I made a sad mistake last summer; and if the court knows herself, and she thinks she does, I don't mean to repeat it. As to whether Ned Melton stole and ran off with the diamonds or not, I answer, I don't know."

"But you have your opinion," insisted Mr. Gumbridge with a smile.

"I haven't any opinion at all."

"Laying aside all this sentiment," continued Mr. Gumbridge seriously, "we may as well look at things

as they are. You learned enough of Edmund last summer to form a strong admiration of his character."

"I did; and so did you."

"We had formed that before," Mr. Shipman hastened to say. "It was not necessary that he should go through the fire to prove that he was pure gold."

"But," insisted his partner, "let's confine ourselves to the business before us. Each of us three loves the lad; we would willingly do all in our power to save him, and we've got to do something," he said impressively. "The bad feature about the business is this: the boy, for the first time since he began selling and delivering diamonds for us, did not return to the store and deposit what he had over in our safe" —

"But he may have had no time," Mr. Shipman hastened to explain.

"I admit that, and, had he made that his excuse the next morning, neither you or I would have given it a thought; but he left town that night, without the knowledge of his uncle" —

"How do you know that?" asked his partner.

"The inference is reasonable, is it not, Blowitz?"

The detective inclined his head, adding, —

"The fact that Colonel Bainbridge offered this reward leaves no doubt in my mind that they had a bitter disagreement over something and the boy departed secretly. If his uncle would only tell all he knew, it would clear up a great deal."

"I would like to see you get the information from him," remarked Mr. Gumbridge with a bitter laugh.

"I'll do it!" was the confident reply, "and that, too, before we are three days older."

"Good luck attend you; but young Melton is gone, and we have received no word from him, nor has the slightest hint come as to the whereabouts of the diamonds. Why did he not send them back, or deposit them where they could be found?"

The diamond brokers fixed their expectant gaze on the detective, who smiled and answered, —

"I don't know."

"The most that we can do is to suspend judgment. Neither of us wishes to believe that the youth has turned thief, but I may as well say here that I have little doubt of it."

He did not expect the detective to make any response to this pointed declaration; but he did expect a vigorous protest from his partner, and he turned his eyes expectantly towards him. To his surprise, Mr. Shipman remained silent, looking thoughtfully at the floor, his face the picture of distress. Since the other spoke not, Mr. Gumbridge felt it incumbent upon him to add something in the way of explanation: —

"Sentiment will not do any good, and it is a waste of words for us to repeat that the belief is painful to us all; but I know that you two, despite your silence,

agree with me. Is it strange, indeed, when the leader in church matters, who has gone in and out before his fellow-men without reproach for forty years, calmly confesses that, when he was late at prayer-meeting, it was because he was detained at the office engaged in forging bonds; that a Sunday-school superintendent, who has been a model for four-fifths of his life, and now is gray and stooped, owns up that he has been shamelessly raising another family, not fifty blocks from his own home; that when members of our governing bodies, who have preached honesty all their lives, calmly accept a bribe of fifty thousand dollars, and then try to justify it when found out — I say, when all this occurs over and over again, is it strange that a youth of eighteen years succumbs to temptation and follows in their footsteps? Would it not be strange if he did not? Now, Blowitz, don't answer, 'I don't know.'"

"No; for you have rightly answered the question in asking it. I want the opportunity of telling Colonel Bainbridge that he is tenfold more guilty than his nephew."

"I hope you will do so, for it is the truth."

"Well, to come down to business," resumed Mr. Gumbridge, "we want young Melton found, and we wish you to find him."

"I will engage to do my best; but, before undertaking it, I must understand one thing. Suppose I succeed, what is your intention respecting him?"

"Explain what you mean."

"What do you intend doing with him?"

"That question is unnecessary; I am as anxious as Mr. Shipman to find him. Tell him for us, no matter where or under what circumstances you find him, that we are his friends; that if every one of the diamonds is lost beyond recovery, we shall not punish him, providing he is truly repentant; that he may come either to my door or that of my partner, and he will be taken in as a son and so treated; that we will freely forgive his lapse from integrity, and do our utmost to put him on the right track again; that he has almost broken our hearts by his course; that we sympathize with him, and are praying night and morning for him. Do I speak your sentiments, Shipman?" he asked, turning toward his partner.

There were tears in the eyes of the latter. He attempted to speak, but his voice broke. He extended his hand to the elder, and murmured, "God bless you, Wilton!"

"I have my answer," said Detective Blowitz, whose voice, too, was uncertain, as he rose to his feet. "I now take up the sorrowful work; you may not hear from me for days or weeks, or possibly months; but you will know that if I am alive, I am bending all my energies to solving the problem, in which my heart is equally interested with my head. Good-night, gentlemen."

CHAPTER V.

WHILE Detective Blowitz was holding his conference with Messrs. Shipman & Gumbridge, a young man walked slowly back and forth on the other side of the street, his actions and manner showing that he was holding the store under surveillance. The fact was, he had seen the three gentlemen pass within, and he knew what was going on. He was aware that they were discussing the absence of Ned Melton, and forming some plan respecting him. The youth never allowed the front door to escape his scrutiny for more than a minute at a time; his interest lay there, and he paid little heed to what else was going on around him. At the moment the detective emerged and walked briskly toward Broadway, this watcher was directly opposite and stood motionless until he had disapppeared. Then he strode rapidly across the street and knocked sharply on the door.

"Come in!" called Mr. Gumbridge, who was sitting at the rear, talking in a low tone to his partner.

"Ah, that's you, McCutcheon," added the other, as his clerk stepped within, and, closing the door, walked back to where his employers were smoking and talking.

"James," said Mr. Shipman kindly, "you look bad."

"Because I feel so," he replied with a sigh; "this trouble about Ned Melton is killing me. I have come to ask a favor."

"What is it?"

"I want you to grant me a leave of absence."

"You are not going to fall ill again?"

"I hope not; but it is not on that account. I want to start on a hunt for Ned."

The two gentlemen looked at him in surprise, then the elder said, —

"Do you think you can find him?"

"I believe if any one can, I will succeed; despite the black looks of things, I will never believe he is guilty until the proof is beyond all question. Even then," he added with a wan smile, "I suspect I shall retain doubts."

"Your solicitude is creditable to you," said Mr. Gumbridge; "and though it will put us to some inconvenience, I am disposed to grant your request. What do you say?" he asked turning toward his partner.

"I cannot say that I hold much hope of your success, James, but your request is granted."

"Thank you," was the grateful response of the youth, whose manner showed great relief.

"Sit down," said Mr. Gumbridge, as McCutcheon rose to go; "we would like to know something of your

intentions, for you need not be told that we are as deeply interested as you."

"Had I not been certain of that, I would not have made the request which you have granted," replied McCutcheon, resuming his seat.

"It is right that we should tell you that we have engaged Mr. Blowitz to undertake the same task as you, and I may frankly say that we think his chances of success are much the better."

"Perhaps they are," modestly responded the young man, not thinking it best to tell them he knew all about the detective, whom, as the reader well knows, he had met more than once before.

"You do not wish to join forces with him?"

"He would not permit it if I did; but I prefer to follow my own ideas in the matter."

"Have you any suspicion as to whither Ned went?"

"None, nor the slightest clew; but I was his most intimate friend, knew his admirable character better than any one, understood his troubles, his thoughts, his wishes, his ambitions, and plans better than any one else; I have some faith that this knowledge will be of help to me."

"You might persuade Colonel Bainbridge to give you some facts that would prove of aid."

McCutcheon shook his head, with another faint smile.

"I wouldn't dare risk going there again, after my last

reception. No; I shall ask nothing from him. The fact is, I have formed no definite plan. I have had a score, and none of them may be practicable. I wish I could tell you something more, but I can't."

"I suppose your action will lead you out of the city?"

"I believe it will; but you can understand that the first great necessity with me is to secure a clew that will give the starting-point; to what part of the world that will take me, I have no more idea than you."

The gentlemen were convinced that their clerk was not trying to hide anything from them. Hitherto Mr. Gumbridge had done most of the conversation for himself and Mr. Shipman, but the latter now spoke, —

"I commend with all my heart the course you have laid out for yourself. I bid you God speed, and you may consider yourself free to keep at your task as long as you choose, or as long as you see any hope of success. You will need money" —

"I prefer to use my own means," interrupted McCutcheon; "it will be but a small part of what I owe Ned Melton."

"I prefer that you should not," calmly responded Mr. Shipman, withdrawing his large wallet from his inner coat pocket; "this is our affair more than yours."

He counted out a large amount, laying the bills on his knee, until they aggregated the sum he had in mind, when he folded them up, and, leaning toward the clerk, extended them to him.

"There, take that; if you run short in any part of the world, we will honor your draft."

"No young men in New York ever had kinder employers than we," said McCutcheon, deeply touched by the generosity and confidence of the gentlemen. "I have not slept two hours a night since this dreadful thing happened; and now that I am at liberty to do what I have longed to do from the first, I shall push it through to the end, with the help of Heaven."

"When will you start?"

"To-night, without a half-hour's delay."

"But," said the surprised Mr. Shipman, "suppose you find it necessary to leave the city for an indefinite time?"

"Then I will leave it by the first train. I may as well add," he said smilingly, "that I have discounted your permission. I knew you would give it, and told my parents so. They are hardly less distressed than you, for they love Ned Melton as if he were my brother. When I left home, therefore, they understood that I might be gone for weeks. My valise is at the saloon of Micky Murphy, just round in Nassau Street. You remember it was he who gave us valuable help in clearing up the mystery of the black diamond. I have an envelope addressed to my father, and I have only to pencil a few words, and seal and mail it, and everything will be understood at home."

"You are a man of methods," laughed the elder partner; "well, good luck to you," he added, extending his hand, as the clerk rose to go; "no one desires more fervently your success than we."

McCutcheon shook the hand also of Mr. Shipman, who repeated the wishes of his partner, and then passed out upon the street.

"Do you know what I think?" asked Mr. Shipman, after the departure of the clerk.

"How should I know, Adonijah?"

"I have more faith in that young fellow's success than I have in Blowitz's."

"For what reason?"

"It isn't because he knows Ned more thoroughly, or that, if Ned finds that the two are searching for him, he will communicate sooner with the youth than with the man; but (though these have their weight) because McCutcheon possesses what may be called a native detective instinct. He proved that in the black diamond business."

"That may all be, but it cannot overbalance the same instinct in Blowitz, trained by a score of years. Soldiers may be born, but they never amount to much until trained. It is the same in all professions, but after all you may be right. If we live, we shall see."

CHAPTER VI.

Detective Blowitz acted upon the intimation he had given to Messrs. Shipman & Gumbridge, to the effect that the starting-point in his efforts to trace the missing Ned Melton must be his guardian, Colonel Bainbridge. He alone could furnish the information that was likely to afford the clew which must have an important bearing on what the officer did. A detective like the man named, who has had a long metropolitan experience, gathers a good deal of information about people who have no suspicion of the fact. He often learns family secrets which the persons believe have never traveled beyond their own thresholds. He meets men as strangers who would be startled if the officer should sit down and tell them all he knew of their private matters. Such was the case, to a certain extent, regarding Colonel Bainbridge. The affair of the black diamond had set Blowitz to investigating in the direction of the ex-officer, with the result that he learned a great deal about him. For instance, he was aware that he was very methodical in his habits; that he was irascible, impatient of contradiction, exceedingly opinionated, and quick to take offense. He knew that he

passed certain evenings at home, and that he rarely missed spending Tuesday and Friday nights at the Albatross Club, to which the detective possessed the *entrée*.

It was on a Tuesday evening that Blowitz held his conference with the jewelers and diamond brokers; and, after bidding them good-night, he boarded an up-town Broadway car, and within the following hour sat in the smoking-room of the club, exchanging a few pleasant words with his acquaintances as they came and passed. A glance around the luxurious apartments disclosed that Colonel Bainbridge had not yet arrived; but that fact caused the detective no uneasiness, for the hour was comparatively early.

Precisely at half-past nine the colonel appeared. He shook hands with a number, for he was well known there. He was polite and courteous to all; but the observant eyes of the detective saw the story of the inward chagrin and vexation he had suffered. Of course no gentleman made reference to the trouble, for it would have been resented on the instant; but every one knew it, for that fatal advertisement had revealed the whole secret. Blowitz managed his business with great tact. Without seeming to make any effort, he secured, through the aid of a close friend, an introduction to the colonel, and formed one of a party at a game of whist, in which the two took part. The officer pos-

sessed fine conversational powers, and he was never more charming than on this particular evening. Under the influence of the wine, the colonel became quite mellow as the hours advanced; and, all in due time, the detective and the military gentleman were seated in one corner by themselves, smoking and chatting in familiar converse as though they had been friends for years. Blowitz had made a pretense of drinking, but swallowed hardly a drop of the poison that steals away men's brains. He needed all his wits, and knew better than to fuddle his mental powers by indulgence in drink. With a cleverness that could not be excelled, Blowitz approached the delicate theme. Had Colonel Bainbridge been perfectly sober, he never would have allowed himself to be trolled as he was. The detective, of course, was all sympathy with the old soldier, and referred to the preceding week, when he happened to be passing the residence of the colonel late at night, and was surprised at the sight of a young man, who came down the front steps, valise in hand, and walked hurriedly in the direction of Broadway.

"I watched him," continued Blowitz, carrying out his tremendous deception; "but when the lamplight showed him to be your nephew, whom I had seen in the store of Shipman & Gumbridge, I knew that he was all right, and gave him no further attention."

"What time of night was that?" asked the colonel,

who plainly showed the effects of the wine he had drunk.

"It couldn't have been before eleven o'clock."

"Before eleven o'clock," repeated the other; "I shouldn't think it was, for he didn't leave my library until eleven, and it was a half-hour before I retired. I know he didn't go out until after that."

"No doubt you are right, and it was close upon midnight, though I had no occasion to notice the exact time."

"It's a pity you didn't follow him," said the colonel with something of his old bitterness, "for it would have been easier to trace and arrest him. Now it will take some time, but it will be done!"

"I am sure he will be found; but you must remember, Colonel, that this is a big country, and there are a good many places in which a person can conceal himself."

"But the officers of the law are sharp, and though it may take a long time, they are almost sure to run down a criminal in the end."

"Perhaps the officers you have engaged" —

"I haven't engaged any officer," interrupted the soldier angrily; "I have done nothing but advertise a large reward; that is enough to set half the detectives in the country at work. Shipman & Gumbridge thought they did a smart thing when they ordered their name taken off that advertisement. It was all penuri-

ousness on their part, but the offer is *bona fide* for all that."

"May I ask whether you have any suspicion of the direction taken by your nephew?"

The colonel seemed on the point of resenting this direct question; but the manner of the detective was so sauve, and the wine already imbibed was so soothing, that he unbended to the extent his examiner desired.

"Since we have gotten on the subject, I may say that we had a hot disagreement in my library. The young man is very extravagant — very extravagant. Those folks, Shipman & Gumbridge, in the face of my orders, insisted on giving him a large increase in salary. I had warned them against it. When they persisted, I notified the boy that he should serve them no longer, and gave him to understand that I knew he was at the bottom of this continual plea for more money. He denied it, but I insisted, and he went to his room; that's the last I saw of him. In the morning it was found that his bed had not been occupied, and he left a note for me saying that, inasmuch as I doubted his word, he would leave the shelter of my roof forever. That's all there is about it."

"He didn't say a word concerning the diamonds?"

"Not to me; I didn't know they were in his possession until that young jackanapes of a clerk came

the next day to make inquiry. Then the whole thing was plain; he made the quarrel with me a pretext for flight, and of course took the precious stuff with him."

Detective Blowitz had gathered all the information that could be reached from this source; and after turning the conversation on more agreeable subjects, he bade the colonel good-night and left. The assertion that many of the most brilliant successes in every calling or profession are due to accident has been made so often that it must be true. Wrong doing, which has baffled the combined skill of a dozen experts, has been unearthed by some little clew which no one was expecting, and which came to the surface as the result of no effort on the part of the men engaged in hunting for it. Sometimes years have passed, and the case has been relegated to the long list of unsolvable ones, when a trifling discovery brings to light all that has been hidden so long, and the detective, after ceasing to search for the lost thread, finds it at his feet. When Detective Blowitz emerged from the Albatross Club, he had not the remotest conception of where to turn or what to do to find the trail of Ned Melton; and yet that same night, and within the following hour, he made an important discovery that set his nerves tingling with hope.

CHAPTER VII.

Detective Blowitz walked from the club-house to Broadway, and turned south in the direction of the Battery. He did not take a car at once, for he could think better while sauntering along than when walking fast or riding. He could board any one of the street-cars whenever he wished, for they were continually passing.

It has been said (and incidents have repeatedly proven the truth of the assertion) that a fugitive from justice in the city of New York can find no more secure hiding-place than in the metropolis itself. Had Ned Melton been a veteran in crime, the officer would have instituted search in the city before looking elsewhere, but he was firmly persuaded that the lad was not there. A youth, fleeing from his parents or guardians, does not stay so near home; his first impulse is to get as far away as possible. If there was anything certain, it was that Ned Melton had taken the first chance to leave town. But where the means of egress are so numerous, how could it be determined which he had taken? Evidently there was no certain method; but it was necessary to reach some decision, and the detective did it while walking along Broadway.

"He would not take one of the steamers, for that would have required the expenditure of more money than he was likely to have with him. (How little did the detective suspect the total amount of Ned Melton's funds on that eventful night!) He would have to stay in the city until he could pawn some of the diamonds, and he would not take the risk of the delay. Besides, he could be more readily traced if he was booked on one of the outgoing steamers, and word could be cabled that would lead to his arrest the moment he reached Liverpool or Queenstown. No; he steered clear of that."

Having disposed of this theory, Blowitz took up others.

"He might have taken the cars at the Grand Central station, or crossed to Hoboken and left by way of the West Shore, but there is little attraction to the average American runaway boy in that direction. Northern New York is not inviting; and, before going far, he would have to cross into British territory. The farther he went, the more displeasing the country would become, and, therefore, he didn't go north. The bulk of this great United States lies to the south and west; and the runaway boy instinctively turns his face toward the setting sun, especially if he has a notion of hunting grizzly bears, and scalping Indians, which Ned Melton hadn't. It's all speculation on my part; but it's dollars

to doughnuts that Ned Melton struck a bee-line for the Jersey City ferry, and left by way of the Erie, Central, Morris and Essex, or the Pennsylvania. The last named is the favorite route, and I'll turn my attention thither; but I'm blessed if I know which way to look for a clew, unless it may be got from one of the conductors."

Without following Detective Blowitz's ratiocinations, it may be said that one fact had weight with him in deciding to begin his hunt at the Pennsylvania station. The Washington Express left the New York side at a quarter-past midnight, pulling out of the Jersey City station fifteen minutes later. The quarrel between Ned Melton and his uncle took place, as nearly as could be learned, shortly after eleven. The lad doubtless went to his room, and, after a few minutes' reflection, made up his mind to leave. It took him but a short time to pack his valise and get ready. Then he must have waited until after his uncle retired before stealing out-of-doors. The most direct course for him to reach a railway station was to walk to the corner, and board a Broadway car. The elevated would have served probably as well; but their trains run less frequently at that hour, and he might have been compelled to wait too long. Besides, it is a fact that the Broadway surface cars make about as good time in coming south, after theater hours, as do the trains of the elevated railway.

There are some who claim to have made the test and found that they reached the Brooklyn Bridge entrance in less time by the former route.

"Ned took the Broadway car, and was just in time at Courtlandt Street to make that train, and, by George! this is the spot too!"

This exclamation was caused by the discovery of Blowitz, that he was standing on the very corner down which he would have to turn in order to reach the residence of Colonel Bainbridge. He believed, therefore, that it was there Ned Melton appeared, and boarded the surface car. True, this was building up a theory on pure speculation, but it was all he could do. He paused a minute or two, lit a cigar from the stump which he threw away, and looked up the street. He saw the light of a car approaching at a swift pace. The detective was through with his ruminating, and was ready to ride. He walked toward the middle of the street, and noted the speed of the horses. The driver, catching sight of him, began twisting the brake, but Blowitz signaled him to keep on; he had never yet seen a street-car going too fast for him to board without trouble. There is a knack about such things, and the detective possessed it to perfection. He took two or three quick steps, made a light jump, and there he stood beside the driver, with his hands in his coat pockets, leaning back against the door, and smoking his

cigar as leisurely as when seated in the club with Colonel Bainbridge.

"Be the powers, but ye did that nately," remarked the driver, as he released the brakes, touched up the horses, and sent the car bowling along at a rattling pace.

Blowitz saw he was a good-natured fellow, and drawing a cigar from his pocket, offered it to the driver.

"Thank you, sorr," replied the man, placing the present in his pocket; "I'll take that home to me boy Moike. I prefars a pipe; and if the owld woman saw me smoking a cigar, she would faint wid amazement."

"So you think I know how to board a car, do you?" remarked the detective, after dropping his fare into the hand of the conductor, as it was shoved through the opening in the door, with a sharp rap to remind the passenger of his obligation.

"Ye proved the same by the shtyle ye showed, but there are many that does it aqually well. A waak ago last noight a likely lad baat ye away out of soight."

"How was that?"

"I was some minutes late that noight, and was tearing down Broadway wid the spaad of a steam-ingine. The condooctor and mesilf made belave that we didn't saa siveral that wanted to git aboord; for we was moighty anxious to make up that time, and we couldn't afoord to linger. Just as we was passing the corner

where ye was standing, out pops a big boy wid a valise in his hand. He didn't signal for us to howld up; and it wouldn't have done any good if he had, for I touched up the animals, and wan of them was alriddy on the jump, wid the car rocking and bumping loike a ship in a gale. I didn't think anything more of the lad whin, be the powers, he came running alongside the car, jist as aisily as if he was dancing; and wid no more effort than he would make in stepping over a pin, he landed alongside me wid a playsant 'Good-evening!' It fairly took me brith away; and I looked around at him with his smiling face, which I could see plain enough whin we passed the lights to observe that he was handsome. He made little of it, and said he took the front platform because he liked to ride in the fresh air, and was afeard his valise would be in the way at the raar. As he whisked by one of the loights he glanced at his watch, and said he guessed we was in time for him to catch the train. I remarked that we would not only catch the same, but would baat it aisy."

"What night was that?"

"One waak ago last night."

"Where did he leave your car?"

"At Courtlandt Street."

"What time of night was it?"

"The City Hall clock showed tin minutes past twelve."

CHAPTER VIII.

WAS there ever a more extraordinary piece of luck, pure and simple? Detective Blowitz had walked a certain distance along Broadway until he completed his mental calculations, and then, without the least premeditation in doing so, boarded the very car that had carried Ned Melton the preceding week over the same route. Not only that, but here was the driver telling, with little questioning on the officer's part, the whole story. It was so direct that there was not a particle of doubt that it was the missing youth who had boarded the car so cleverly, and left it at Courtlandt Street just in time to catch the south-bound train, with which the last ferry-boat connected at a quarter-past twelve.

"I have had such things happen before," mused the detective, "but never anything quite so remarkable as this. If there is such a thing as a special providence, this is one."

He was so pleased over the discovery that he took his last cigar from his pocket and thrust it upon the driver. The latter protested, but finally stowed it away to keep company with the other for that petted son of his.

Blowitz glanced up at the City Hall clock, and saw that it was five minutes past twelve. Two minutes later he had leaped off the car, and was walking briskly down Courtlandt Street. His car was on time, and he had no doubt about catching the right ferry-boat, without the haste necessary on the part of Ned Melton, who went that way before him, though he saw he had no time to loiter. The next tangible point that seemed to present itself to the detective was the conductor of the train on which Ned Melton had ridden. While the comparative short runs over the Pennsylvania are in charge, as a rule, of the same conductors, those which run beyond Philadelphia toward the West are arranged by a system of alternation, since the necessities of the situation compel. Hence it was no way certain that Blowitz, although taking the same train that had carried his young friend away, would meet the conductor who took up the youth's ticket. But once more fortune favored him in a striking manner. It was the same official, as he admitted when the detective gained a chance of questioning him. He had run that train, and left Jersey City at half-past twelve, eight days previous.

"If this thing goes on," mused Blowitz, "I'll find Ned waiting for me on the platform when I reach Philadelphia."

But "this thing" was far from going on. The detective expected to strike a snag on questioning the

official further, and he was not disappointed. The conductor was a courteous gentleman; and when he could gain the time, sat down beside Blowitz, with the expressed hope of giving him the information he was seeking. But when Blowitz described the lad with the valise, the official laughed and shook his head.

"That's a little beyond me. If there had been anything out of the common with the boy, or had he done anything unusual on the train, I might be able to recall him; but where there may have been a dozen that would answer your description, you can see that any attempt on my part would be certain to mislead you."

The detective could not deny this; and his investigation on board the train necessarily ended then and there. He must wait until he was farther along. Forced to turn in upon his own thoughts, and to build up his theories once more on simple speculation, it struck the officer as likely that Melton would continue his westward course until hundreds of miles away. "With the enormous area spreading out before him, and with so much to choose from, he would have his choice among a hundred different routes. He had every reason to believe that no steps would be taken, if taken at all, looking to pursuit and capture, under twenty-four hours, and a vast deal can be done in that time. Much as he knew his uncle would be enraged, I am sure he never thought he would proceed to the extremity of

publishing his description in a paper, and offering a reward for his arrest. Well aware of the faith his employers had in him, he could feel equally certain that they would do nothing under several days, as, in fact, they did not. He, therefore, counted upon plenty of time in which to carry out his arrangements. He left home under an impulse, but he is proud and high-spirited, and will not turn back. While riding on the train between New York and Philadelphia, Ned Melton did his thinking, and laid out his course. What that was I have as much idea as the king of the Cannibal Islands."

It was about half-past three in the morning when the Washington Express rolled into the Broad-street station; and, descending the steps, the detective walked through the public buildings, down Market to Ninth Street, where he crossed to Chestnut, and went to bed at the Continental. He had left home so hurriedly that he had no valise with him, to say nothing of the articles of convenience which that useful receptacle should contain. But that was easily remedied in the morning, before he set out to find the clew which thus far had eluded him since leaving the metropolis. He had no expectation of seeing Ned Melton's name on the register of the Continental Hotel; and he did not find it there, nor any writing resembling that of his young friend, as he certainly was justified in regarding the

youth. He looked through the big book, as he did that of more than one other prominent hotel of the Quaker City, but without success.

The first real step taken by him was in putting himself in communication with the authorities. Thus it was that thorough work was done within the succeeding twenty-four hours. Inquiries at the various pawn establishments failed to show that any unmounted diamonds had been offered within the preceding fortnight. One or two transactions reported at the jewelers promised something, but, when followed up, ended in naught. True, the youth might have been sagacious enough to avoid those places where he knew inquiries would be made, and yet that same sagacity would have told him that this was safe and the readiest way of raising the funds he must need. He had plenty of time at his command in which to do so. If he sold any of the gems in Philadelphia, he succeeded in concealing all traces of the circumstances attending the sale.

"I wonder," mused Detective Blowitz, "whether chance will once more come to my help. It is too much to expect it, but I will keep my eyes and ears open."

But, though brought to a seeming standstill, he was not the one to yield or remain idle. His extensive experience had given him a large acquaintance with his brethren throughout the country. Returning to

the Continental, he sent off a number of dispatches to the leading cities in the West and South-west; each was given what information he possessed, and asking as speedy a reply from each as was possible. Several hours must pass before he could expect any answers; and he spent the time in sauntering aimlessly through the city, feeling a weak hope that he would stumble upon something, but it can hardly be said that he was disappointed when he failed to do so. In the evening he visited a place of amusement, with the detective who had replied to his inquiries about R. Field McFarlane, when some suspicion attached to that gentleman concerning the theft of the famous black diamond. Thus it came about that he did not return to the Continental until nearly midnight. He found five replies awaiting him. Four contained no encouragement, but the fifth was to the point. It was dated at St. Louis, and said,—

"We think we have placed your man. We advise you to come on without delay."

CHAPTER IX.

MEANWHILE James McCutcheon was working with might and main to trace his missing friend. As in the affair of the black diamond, he and the professional detective started from opposite points; the latter (though distressingly against his will) was acting on the presumption that Ned Melton had taken all or a part of the diamonds with him, using the proceeds for his benefit, in the sad course he had decided upon; the former implicitly believed his friend to be innocent. It seems like a reflection on the exceptional sagacity of the clerk, to which reference has been made more than once, to say that he should insist upon the innocence of Ned, with the appearance of everything so overwhelmingly against him; but this faith was not based on mere sentiment.

"In the first place," mused the honest McCutcheon, immediately after the scant facts were learned, "no boy or man becomes bad all at once. The fall of a person is gradual, though the act which makes it known to the world may come with the suddenness of the lightning stroke. Previous to that (and the youth spoke a great moral truth which I beg you never to forget), the

change has been going on in the heart and moral nature. The individual has been gradually sinking, dallying with conscience, fighting his good impulses, until at last the hour comes when the bulwarks crumble and he throws off all semblance of virtue. Now, if Ned Melton is a thief, he has been drifting toward that point for weeks and months, and I would have known it. Instead, there isn't a purer young fellow, one whose principles are grounded on a firmer foundation, in this whole United States of America. I would as soon suspect my own mother as he."

This was strong language, but it shows the faith that was ingrained in McCutcheon. Nevertheless, he was wise enough to confront the dubious facts.

"I can't deny the possibility that in a burst of excitement, resulting from the conversation with his guardian, he may have acted rashly and done that which he would have been quick to condemn in another, and quicker still to condemn in himself upon recovering from his excited condition. A week has now passed, and nothing has been heard from him. If he had started off with the diamonds, they would have been returned to Shipman & Gumbridge the following day, or else word would have reached them, telling where they safely awaited their call. Nothing of the kind has been done; and, therefore, it is as certain as that the sun shines at midday, that Ned Melton has not stolen the stones."

This was the course of reasoning adopted by McCutcheon, as time passed without bringing any word from his friend. As in the former cases, he resolutely faced the difficulties created by this theory. If Ned Melton was innocent of the theft of the diamonds, why did he not take steps to restore them to their rightful owners? This was the question whose answer almost broke the hearts of his employers, and forced Detective Blowitz, in spite of himself, to believe that his young friend had become a criminal and fugitive from justice. But McCutcheon reasoned otherwise.

"Ned has sent a communication to Shipman & Gumbridge telling the whole truth, but that communication has miscarried. It has been lost; and he is wandering somewhere, with no thought of the cloud resting on his name, and the anguish he has brought to his friends."

This was a generous and comfortable theory, to a certain extent; but it could not fully satisfy the chivalrous McCutcheon, who would hesitate at no sacrifice for the good of the missing fellow. True, letters often do miscarry; but it was not likely that, if Ned Melton had sent one to the firm, it would have failed to reach them. McCutcheon would hardly admit the grief he felt over the fact that Ned had sent him no word. He was sure that, had the situation been reversed, he would have gone to Ned before any one else, and made him

his confidant, but more than a week had now passed and there came no sign.

The columns of the *Herald* had contained a carefully worded "personal" for several days after the disappearance of young Melton, and which, had it met his eye, he would have recognized as coming from McCutcheon, who inquired at the office again and again, with a weary longing for the answer, and scanned the columns of the paper each morning, until it seemed he knew them by heart, but always with the same dismal result.

The suspicion McCutcheon formed, when he learned that Ned had left a communication in his room for his uncle, was that he had written one for his employers, and probably for him as well, but that the irate Colonel Bainbridge had torn them up and flung them aside without so much as reading a word or taking a step toward forwarding them to the addresses. If this were the fact, it left the diamonds still unaccounted for; since, had they been left with the note addressed to his employers, as it was natural to suppose had been the case, Colonel Bainbridge could not have failed to see them, and would have lost no time in delivering the jewels to their owners. But without following the young man through his labyrinthine reasoning, let us note what he did.

Acting on the faith that nothing could induce Ned

Melton to take a penny that did not belong to him, and knowing his straitened financial situation (that is, in a general way; even he did not suspect Ned's desperate straits), the conclusion was that he had not gone far from the city of New York, simply because of the lack of means to do so. Ned had often spoken of the grand West, and declared that, when the opportunity came to him, he would spend months and perhaps years there enjoying its wonders, before feeling any disposition to look upon the marvels of the Old World.

"Ned has turned his face toward the West, but he hasn't got there yet. He was able to make only a fair start with the money he had, when he has halted for the purpose of earning the means to go farther. I judge that he has enough to take him to Philadelphia or Pittsburg and leave something over," added McCutcheon, reasoning on the belief that his friend possessed far more than was the fact; "so that he is working somewhere near the city, under another name, and using great care to hide his identity. It will take him some weeks to earn the money he needs, and when he does get it he will resume his wanderings toward the Pacific.

Thus, as will be seen, James McCutcheon and Detective Blowitz, following diverse lines, arrived substantially at the same conclusion; namely, that Ned Melton had started toward Philadelphia, and in this

conclusion they were correct. Rather oddly it came about that the two pursuers set out on the same night in the true direction, and both stopped over in Philadelphia. But McCutcheon, having several hours the start, arrived in the Quaker City before the detective had left the metropolis.

The youth set to work without delay, though apparently there was precious little that he could do. He retired at a late hour, stopping at the Bingham House under an assumed name (for he wished to avoid Detective Blowitz), and on the following day learned of the professional's presence. It was creditable to the young man's sagacity that he kept pretty good track of the officer's movements, without the latter finding it out. Despite the conviction of Detective Blowitz that the fugitive, as he may be considered, had reached the West several days before, and despite the St. Louis telegram confirming, as it would seem, this theory, McCutcheon clung to the belief that Ned, at that hour, was within comparatively short distance of New York City; and, acting upon this belief, he put in execution a scheme which was certain to show whether he was right or wrong in his ideas.

CHAPTER X.

On the second night after Detective Blowitz received his dispatch in Philadelphia, he was in the city of St. Louis, eager to follow the clew that he believed awaited him there. It looked as if the good fortune that had shown itself on the eve of his enterprise was to come to his relief again, for unexpected information was furnished to him. The chief who had answered his inquiry from the Quaker City did not content himself with merely that, but set measures on foot that resulted in something — a fact mainly due to the full information given by the inquirer in his own telegram.

"Do you know of a certainty when this young man left the city of New York?" asked the chief of detectives of the Mound City.

Blowitz reflected a moment and gave the date.

"Three days later," replied the St. Louis official, "a young gentleman called at the Lindell and remained over a part of two days. He seemed to be about eighteen or nineteen years old, was well dressed, fine looking, and gentlemanly in deportment."

"But you are aware, my dear sir," said Blowitz with a smile, "that there are hundreds of youths in this country who fully answer that description."

"Unquestionably, and I would have been unwise to base any hope on the simple facts that I have given."

The caller was all attention, for he saw that something important was coming.

"He registered under the name of Fred Wilton, with his address as New York City."

"Yes," assented Blowitz, feeling that there was little in this fact upon which to pin hope.

"All that might signify nothing; but he showed a fine unmounted diamond to one of the clerks at the Lindell, and asked to be directed to some jeweler who was likely to purchase it."

Detective Blowitz pricked up his ears; this looked like business.

"The name of Parson & Perkins, one of our leading firms on Chestnut Street, was given to him, and he went thither once or twice and sold the gem. He returned to the hotel, stayed a while, as if he wished to take a look at the town, and then left. I think it will be well for us to visit the jewelry establishment."

The suggestion was a good one, and was acted upon, the two gentlemen discussing the matter while on the way thither. The chief had been there before; and being well known to the firm, one of the most important in the West, he was received and treated with courtesy, as was his companion, for the reason that he was vouched for by the eminent head of the detective department.

"Yes, it was I who bought the diamond," remarked the senior member; "the young gentleman came in here just as we were making ready to close up in the evening, and asked me whether I would examine a stone which he wished to sell. I make it a rule never to do anything like that, except by daylight; and I told him to call the next day, which he did.

"The diamond which he handed to me was unmounted and one of the finest I ever saw. It weighed between two and three carats, and was of such fine water that I paid him two hundred and fifty dollars for it."

"Have you the stone in your possession?" asked the chief.

"Yes; I will show it to you."

The gentleman turned to the safe in which the clerks were carefully depositing the valuable trays, and, after some manipulation, brought forth the brilliant and placed it on the show-case before the visitors.

"I suppose you can identify it," he remarked, looking at Blowitz, who replied with a laugh, —

"No; I never saw it before. I presume you have heard of the firm of Shipman & Gumbridge, Maiden Lane, New York?"

"They are known through the trade, and none has a higher reputation."

"A young man in their employ, who was intrusted

with a valuable lot of diamonds, disappeared nearly two weeks ago. He left New York and started in this direction. There is reason to suspect that he who sold that diamond to you is the one for whom we are looking."

"Ah," said the other, interested, "he was so honest in appearance, and so straightforward in manner, that I never felt any suspicion of him."

"Did he give you any account of how he came to have this unmounted diamond in his possession?"

"He said it was one of half a dozen belonging to his brother, who brought them from Holland, and divided them between him and his sister. My visitor remarked he had no special fancy for diamonds, and with his brother's permission, had sold the other two given to him, and he now wished to part with this. That's about all there was to the transaction."

"You would know him if you should meet him again?"

"I am sure of it, for I was impressed with his good looks and pleasing manner. He had very handsome teeth, and some of his remarks were so bright that they attracted the notice of others."

"Does this resemble him?"

Detective Blowitz drew a photograph of Ned Melton and a copy of the *Jeweler's Weekly* from his pocket and spread it before the gentleman, with his finger indi-

cating the advertisement of Colonel Bainbridge. Mr. Parson adjusted his eye-glasses, took up the paper and "photo," and, turning his back to the light, studied the presentment for fully two minutes without speaking. Blowitz and his friend patiently waited for his answer.

"Yes," said Mr. Parson, slipping his eye-glasses off his nose, as he passed the paper back to the New Yorker; "I am quite certain that that is the face of the young man of whom I purchased the diamond last Friday."

"Would you be willing to swear to it?"

"No, I would hardly do that; but there is no doubt in my own mind that that is the young gentleman for whom you are looking — that is, if he is the one who sold me that handsome diamond that I have just shown you."

Thanking Mr. Parson for his courtesy, the two officers went to the Lindell Hotel, not for the purpose of asking any questions, for the St. Louis official had gathered all that was to be obtained by that means, but Blowitz desired to look at the writing on the register of the hotel. He was struck with the resemblance between the two names "Melton" and "Wilton," and could not fail to attach significance to the fact. Inasmuch as Ned Melton was a fugitive from justice, it was not to be supposed that he would travel under his own name, though he might not fear to journey "close" to

it, as he seemed to have done in this instance. Blowitz had studied the handwriting of the youth, for he relied a good deal on the knowledge thus gained, to assist in tracing him. The first glance at the register of the Lindell showed the name of Fred Wilton, written in what is known as "back hand." That, however, was to be expected; for the same caution that would lead him to disguise his name would cause him to try to do the same with his handwriting.

"I believe it is his signature," remarked Blowitz, as he and his friend withdrew to a seat for consultation; "and I am confident that I am on his trail."

"I really hope so," responded his friend; "and I am glad that I can aid you still further."

Blowitz looked at him curiously.

"One of our men has been stationed at the depot for two weeks past on the lookout for a couple of counterfeiters from New Orleans, that are believed to be working their way hither. One of our officers has been there night and day. Every one coming and going has to run the gantlet, and thus it came about that I learned where your young man went, as well as the train which he took from St. Louis."

CHAPTER XI.

"ONE of the parties for whom we are looking," continued the chief, "bears a strong resemblance to your young friend. In fact, the likeness is so close that the officer on duty came within a hair of arresting him on that account. He followed him into the car and passed along the aisle, but finally concluded that he was not the one he wanted."

"I should have thought, in such a case, your man would have given himself the benefit of the doubt."

"So he would, had not the youth shown by his action, or rather by his want of action, that he was innocent. However, one result of the unconscious scrutiny he underwent was that the officer saw his railway ticket."

"Ah, to what point was it?"

"San Antonio, Texas. Still," added the chief, "you know that that does not guarantee that he has gone there."

"It might not in the case of another; but I am so sure that Ned Melton has made his way directly to that town, that I shall leave for the same place to-morrow morning. It would seem that with the help you have given me the business has become quite simple."

"I hope it will prove so," was the hearty wish of the chief, who bade his friend good-night. It was not yet late, and Blowitz sat a while in meditation.

"It looks as if I had struck the trail," he reflected; "and if it turns out that I am right, it will be another of those successes due wholly to accident. In fact," he added grimly, "I don't see that I have done anything as yet which a tyro would not find the simplest kind of task. I can see Ned Melton all through this. In the first place, he has felt a shrinking over the change of name — so much so that the change is not so complete as a real criminal would make it. Then he made no effort to disguise himself. In the jewelry store, his pleasing looks and manner attracted the attention of the senior partner; he was himself there, though that was a monstrous fabrication as to how he came to have the diamond for sale. Shipman told me he could identify the stones, though I'll be hanged if I can understand how he could recognize that which I examined a while ago. It would have been easy enough to arrange for it to be sent to Shipman & Gumbridge for their inspection, but I can't see that there is any need of it. It would take several days, and would not cause any more vigorous efforts than we are making now, for, of course, I wouldn't wait here until we got word from them."

The certainty felt by the detective was such that he was half-disposed to send a dispatch to his employers,

making known what he had learned. He knew how deeply they felt in the matter, and it would be a vast relief to them to find that he was so close on the heels of the straying youth.

"But I'll wait till I get a little closer," he decided; "there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and lip; and if it should prove, after all, that I'm wrong, it will lessen their confidence in me; I'll wait till I'm a little farther along."

It may seem only a piece of ordinary self-restraint and common-sense on the part of Detective Blowitz in thus deciding to withhold communication with the firm in Maiden Lane; but it was unfortunate that he did so, for, had he sent his message, he would have received straightway a reply that would have opened his eyes wider than they had been opened for a long time.

Recalling the number of the room occupied by "Fred Wilton," he asked the clerk whether it would be convenient to allow him to have the same.

"Certainly," was the reply; "it is unoccupied, and on the floor to which I had assigned you."

So it was that the detective carried his valise to the apartment in which the young man slept during the two nights he stayed at the Lindell.

"It is not likely to do me any good," he mused, as he closed the door and let down his baggage; "but it isn't wise to neglect any means that can possibly bring results."

As a matter of course, the room had been swept and looked after many times since the other guest had occupied it. Probably several others had slept there since then; for more than a week had passed, during which a large convention was held in St. Louis, which tested the capacity of the leading hotels. But, with that thoroughness which the officer had learned during his long experience in tracing crime, he began a microscopic examination of the apartment. Naturally his attention was first turned to the waste basket. It was empty. He picked it up and held it between him and the light, hoping to catch sight of some wisp of paper or piece of envelope that had stuck in the interstices; but there was nothing of the kind. He looked around at the carpet. It was swept as clean as a pin, naught showing in the corners or beneath the bed. He drew out the drawers of the stand and bureau. All were as void as when they came from the furniture dealers. Nothing was there on which to hang the least hope. The wardrobe remained, and he drew it open and hung his light overcoat on one of the pegs. As he did so, his eye saw something white on the upper shelf. He drew it forth, and observed that it had writing on it. It was, in fact, a piece of torn envelope. The writing was slight, showing only the letters "Freder," the rest of the name having disappeared with the remaining portion of the envelope.

But on the upper left-hand corner was printed this: —

"If not called for in five days,
Return to
SHIPMAN & GUMBRIDGE,
Maiden Lane, N.Y."

Something like a thrill of superstition went through Detective Blowitz as he held this piece of paper in his hand and read these significant words. What stronger proof could he ask that he was on the right track? Everything, thus far, had indicated that; but here was tangible proof. The envelope was one of the business ones of the well-known firm of jewelers and diamond brokers, such as Ned Melton would have been sure to carry with him. Fate or Providence had led him to leave this telltale evidence behind him, and it had fallen into the hands of the very man who was searching for him.

"All doubt is removed," mused the officer, seating himself, holding the scrap of paper before him, and turning it over and over, as though he expected to discover still further proof of that which he looked upon as now established beyond all question. "Ned Melton slept in that very bed within the past fortnight; he bought a ticket to San Antonio, and it is there or very near it that I shall find him. He is too young in crime to throw me off the track though," added the detective grimly; "he and McCutcheon were too much for me

last summer when I tried to trace them in Houston Street, New York. Well, I am glad that it is to fall to my lot to find him. He is a long way from home, and his feelings will be deeply stirred on meeting me. He won't be defiant I am sure; but when I show him the dreadful mistake he has made, when he learns that his employers, his fellow-clerks, and I, and indeed every one except his uncle, feel as tender toward him as they could toward their nearest relative, who never did anything wrong before, and who fell into a sudden temptation which is not a fatal one, and when he learns how quickly he will be forgiven if he will return, I am sure his better nature will gain the mastery, and he will do whatever I ask; for he will see that it is the only thing that can save him from ruin and disgrace."

With these pleasant thoughts passing through his brain, Detective Blowitz retired for the night, little dreaming the strange experience that awaited him in the near future.

CHAPTER XII.

A COLD autumn night was closing in over the Arkansas wilderness as the south-bound train wound its way toward its distant terminus at Texarkana. These regions are among the loneliest and most dismal in the South-west, there being stretches of hundreds of miles where the miserable cabin of some settler is all that breaks the monotony of the pine barrens and seemingly endless expanse of timber. Detective Blowitz was disappointed in obtaining a sleeping berth. As a rule, there is little difficulty in this, for travel in that direction is rarely great, and the passenger who wants a berth on the sleeper generally has his choice of several; but, as luck would have it, there was not a vacant one when he applied just before pulling out of St. Louis. However, a man following his calling becomes accustomed to roughing it, and he took the matter philosophically. He spent a good deal of the day in smoking, reading several novels, and, when the halts were made at the stations, stretched his limbs by walking briskly up and down, and breathing the pure fresh air as it came from the resinous woods on every hand. Blowitz had never been through this section before, so

that it possessed a certain novelty for a time. But this wore off, as it continued the same thing over and over again, while the long forenoon wore away and the apparently endless afternoon gradually darkened into night. The meals were eaten at the stations, some of which were quite presentable, though I believe the only city at present in the State of Arkansas is the capital. He struck up a conversation with one or two of his fellow-passengers; but there was little of interest in them, and he finally retired within himself. The smoke and warmth in the heater became so oppressive that he located himself in the last car. It happened that the only vacant seat there was the last. So he dropped into that, where he expected to stay until the following morning. The train was due at Little Rock about an hour past midnight, but it had lost so much time that it was not likely to arrive there until two or three hours late.

Although Blowitz had slept little during the preceding three or four nights, he now found it impossible to secure the rest that probably would have come to him had he secured a sleeping berth. But besides this, he was sensible of a peculiar nervousness and unrest, that may have been caused by his enforced idleness for so many hours in a vitiated atmosphere. There was nothing in the task before him to cause this disquiet; for everything looked as if it was plain sailing, and he had

turned the question over in his mind so often that the future, so far as he was able to control it, was irrevocably decided upon. He had formulated just what he would say when he came upon Ned Melton, what arguments he would use, and the means by which he would convince him the most quickly that he was a friend who wanted to do him good. He had settled in his own mind, too, what the youth would say, how he would look, and the manner in which his pride would give way, and the final surrender be effected. How easy it is for us thus to outline the particulars of an impending incident, and how seldom it turns out as we anticipate! At last the detective sank into a doze, in which he hardly lost consciousness of what was going on around him. Occasionally he opened his eyes in a sleepy way, as the light of some station flitted by, and he saw the conductor when he leaned over and drew the little check from his hat-band, where the headgear rested in the rack overhead. Then his senses left him altogether for a brief while, until they suddenly returned, and he became aware that the train was no longer moving. It was standing still in the woods.

"What the mischief is the matter now?" he asked himself, straightening up and wide awake. "If we keep on in this style, or rather don't keep on, we'll drop back a day, and so may reach Little Rock on time after all — helloa!"

He heard a pounding under the car. One of the brakemen was hammering at something that was out of order. There was no saying how long they had waited already, but it was fully a half-hour before matters were righted and the train resumed its creeping progress southward.

"There's no use of growling," muttered Blowitz, adjusting himself as comfortably as he could in his cramped quarters. "We'll arrive there one of these days; but I begin to feel a stronger sympathy for Ned Melton than ever before, that is, if he lived to get through this journey."

A misgiving had come to Detective Blowitz more than once since leaving St. Louis, that everything was not likely to come out as smoothly as he believed at first. The presumption was fair that if young Melton had deliberately stolen the valuable diamonds (and how could he doubt it?) his intelligence would cause him to use every precaution to escape detection. Aware, as he was, that there was no trouble in getting out of New York and well on his way to his destination, he must have been aware, too, that by the time he struck the Mound City measures were likely to be taken for his arrest. It was fair to believe, therefore, that he would begin to use precautions against the very mishap that seemed to be close upon him. Now, for him to ask the clerk of the hotel where he stayed for the name of a

party that would be likely to buy a diamond he wished to sell, and then to go to that same firm with the story he told — all this, I say, had something about it which disturbed Detective Blowitz, as he sat upright in the seat of the train on the Iron Mountain Railway, and looked absently out of the window at the trees that were sweeping backward in the gloom.

"If it wasn't for that piece of envelope I found in his room," mused the officer, "I would have grave doubts as to the result of this journey to Texas. I am hopeful, but not altogether satisfied with the look of things."

It would have been easy to telegraph to the authorities at San Antonio to arrest Fred Wilton; and the chief advised such a course on the part of Blowitz, saying that it was by no means certain that the youth would remain there long enough to be found by him. If he did not like the look of things, he would probably push on to some other point, and possibly would continue across the Rio Grande into Mexico. The result, however, would be an unpleasant complication that was liable to undo all the good he hoped to accomplish. The matter of requisition might interpose, and the fugitive would become defiant and less amenable to the good influence he hoped to exert over him. It cannot be denied that, on the whole, the course of Blowitz promised better results than the one that had been

advised. The consequence of these disturbing thoughts was that the detective found himself thoroughly awake, when nearly every other passenger in the car was asleep or partly so. The hour was late, but he felt not the first disposition to slumber.

"I believe I'll take another smoke," he concluded.

He rose to his feet, took down his hat, caught up his valise, and had made one step in the direction of the smoker, when he noticed that the train was coming to a halt again. He would have concluded that it was for some station or because of a slight accident, had he not observed the suddenness and violence with which the cars were slackening their pace. The engineer had rigidly applied all the brakes, and sounded the whistle several times. The conductor, who was near the middle of the last car, suddenly hurried to the front, his manner showing that he was frightened over something unusual that had taken place.

"There's trouble on the track," he concluded, making his way to the rear platform, which he reached just in time to hear the reports of two rifles, fired near the engine.

"Train robbers as sure as I'm alive!" exclaimed Detective Blowitz; and he was right.

CHAPTER XIII.

Detective Blowitz had learned to act promptly in emergencies. When he became satisfied that the train on which he was riding through the Arkansas wilderness was held up by a gang of criminals, he decided that the best place for him to be was somewhere else. He had a considerable sum of money in his possession, besides a valuable gold watch, presented to him by a loved friend, dead long ago; and he had no intention of parting company with that, so long as a possibility remained of keeping it.

The train was rapidly slackening its pace; and leaning far out from the rear platform, he saw that which confirmed his fears. In the area of light diffused by the headlight of the locomotive, he discerned dark figures hastily gathering at the side of the track, springing up as it seemed from the very ground. Two of them had discharged their Winchesters, though whether they had injured any one was a question that he could not answer until further developments. No doubt they had placed some obstruction on the track which compelled the engineer to come to a halt to escape derailing, even though he knew what awaited

him and the passengers. It might be that there was some treasure in the express car which the outlaws were after, but the chances were that they would "go through" the passengers most thoroughly.

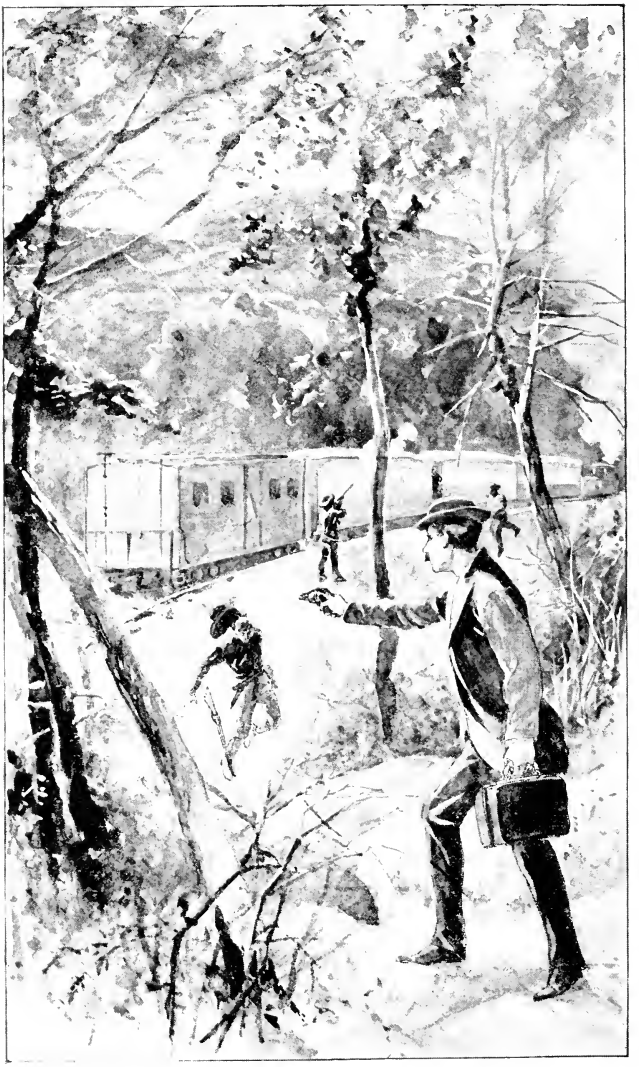
It doesn't take long for news of a contemplated crime of that nature to spread. The resounding screeches of the whistle seemed to apprise the people within the train of what was impending, and consternation spread among them at once. There was a rushing to and fro, a series of frantic attempts to hide pocket-books and valuables in places where they were certain to be found, and a general disorganization and dismay, such as could be produced by no other cause. The outlaws were certain to leap upon the platforms of the cars as soon as the train came to a halt, and indeed before the wheels ceased to revolve. Those who waited until then would be caught inextricably in the trap, with nothing left but to submit calmly to spoliation. It seems at such times as if the criminals invariably have everything their own way. There may be enough armed men on board the train to organize a successful resistance, but no time is given to them. The right leader does not appear; and in the wild confusion of terrified men, women, and children, anything in the nature of defense is sure to result ill for the defenders. So they submit, and content themselves with figuring out how nicely they will fix matters when the attempt is repeated by the marauders.

The coolest man on the south-bound train that night was Detective Blowitz. It happened that he was wide awake when the whistle sent out its alarm, and he understood the nature of the danger that threatened. Resting on the lower step of the rear platform, he waited until the speed was such as to render it safe, when he dropped lightly to the ground, ran the few steps necessary, and then hurriedly darted back into the gloom beside the tracks. Had he deferred this movement five seconds, it would have been too late. Indeed, it looked as it was as if it was too late; for he had not reached the shelter of the wood, when a rough voice called to him with an imprecation, —

"What yer doing? None of that! Back with you or I'll" —

No need of explaining what he meant; for, as he uttered the last words, he let fly with a derringer, the bullet whistling so close to the head of the detective that he felt it graze his cheek.

"That's your style is it?" muttered Blowitz, whose hand made a backward and forward movement with lightning-like quickness, and the revolver at his hip was whipped out like a flash, and the weapon leveled and fired at the dusky figure that was dashing toward the officer. This individual, it is quite certain, 'id not expect anything of the kind. He couldn't have offered a fairer target, and Erastus Blowitz was a tolerably fair



He hit his man hard.

shot. He hit his man hard. He staggered backward with a howl like a wild animal; and before he could recover himself, the man who did it all was gone, he knew not where, but he and his companions would have given a good deal to know.

Meanwhile, matters became lively on the train. Hardly had it come to a halt, when a couple of masked men, with loaded Winchesters, sprang upon the several platforms, one presenting himself at the front and the other at the rear door, where they called to the passengers to keep their seats, and do as they were told. If they didn't obey orders, every offender would have the top of his head blown off, an alternative, which, it would seem, ought to present no difficulty in the way of prompt decision on the part of those thus addressed. It turned out afterward, that the gang had designs on the express car; and had they succeeded in obtaining the expected booty there, it is possible they would not have disturbed the passengers. But though the expressmen obligingly surrendered when requested to do so, and were prompt to give up the keys, there wasn't enough money found in the safe to satisfy the ambition of a single member of the marauders. The only recourse left was the passengers, where they were quite sure to obtain a goodly amount of plunder. And then the spoliation began. It was systematic from the start. One of the first gentlemen addressed in the sleeper was

a minister of the gospel, who was plucky enough to give the miscreants an exhortation, which it is safe to say they will never forget. All the same, however, he was obliged to hand over his watch and pocket-book. He suggested that they take his railway ticket; and the rogue addressed showed his appreciation of the grim joke, by accepting the piece of pasteboard with thanks.

"If you will kindly write your address on it," he added, "I will try to call on you on the first chance."

"It will give me great pleasure to comply," returned the parson, who wrote his name in a bold hand across the back of his railway ticket; "if you will only send me word I will be sure to be at home, for I would be sorry to disappoint you."

"You're a trump!" suddenly exclaimed the masked outlaw; "and I'll be hanged if you sha'n't pass this crowd! Take your things back, and the first feller that says a word to you, yell for me. I'll send him to kingdom come quicker'n greased lightning."

"Don't do that, my friend, for I'm afraid he is no better prepared than you for the great change. I hope you may both be spared to have time to repent."

The grinning miscreant made the minister an obeisance, as he gave his attention to the other passengers, none of whom received the consideration at his hands that was shown to the minister.

In the second car, a lank Hoosier made a show of

resistance, calling on the others to join him in shooting down the first man that attempted to force his way into the car. Poor fellow! No one imitated him, and a pistol shot quickly dropped him, desperately wounded, to the floor, where he lay groaning and suffering, while he and the rest were robbed of everything worth taking.

In another car sat a laboring man, on his way to join his family in Little Rock.

"They've been expecting me for the past six months," said he, as he handed over a ten dollar bill, "and that's all the money I've been able to get together for the sick wife."

"Can't you raise more than ten dollars?" demanded the robber, pausing in front of him in the aisle.

"That's every penny," answered the man, swallowing a lump in his throat; "and she has been too sick to earn any herself."

"You're a purty chump, ain't you? You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Here, give her this twenty dollars, with Sam Gregg's compliments, and tell her if you don't earn more to let me know and I'll make you!"

These were but fitful lights in the giant robbery. With the two exceptions named, none of the others received any consideration; and great brutality was shown in more than one case, not even the sex of the wronged passenger sufficing to protect her from insult.

CHAPTER XIV.

It may have been a shrewd act on the part of Detective Blowitz in slipping off the rear of the train as he did, but one result was as unpleasant as it was unexpected. After his exchange of shots with the fellow that tried to halt him, it was necessary for his own protection that he should keep as "shady" as possible. The fact of the encounter could not remain secret, and the criminals were certain to hunt for him. Any attempt by him to board the train would be detected at once, and, to say the least, would produce unpleasant consequences. The officer was a brave man; but he would have been rash beyond excuse had he sought a hostile meeting with such a number of desperate characters, ready to welcome any excuse for firing off their weapons. Accordingly, all he could do was to wait for a chance to re-enter the cars in safety.

The holding up of the train took less time than he anticipated. He stood among the trees where the darkness was impenetrable, watching for the affair to come to a conclusion, when, to his dismay, he perceived that the cars had begun moving. He saw

his alarming mistake on the instant. He should have improved the brief time at his command, by stealing to a point beyond which the train was halted, and taken the chance of boarding it before its speed became too great. Furthermore, there was reason to believe he might have brought it to a partial halt by getting in front and signaling, though, as the engineer could have held no suspicion that one of the passengers was in hiding while the outrage was going on, it may be doubted whether the ruse would have succeeded. Fully understanding the disagreeable dilemma that threatened, the detective did what he could to repair the oversight. He began picking his way among the trees with such haste that the consequences were anything but agreeable. Extending his free hand in front to protect himself, he was not able to escape a severe bumping against the trunk of a pine, but, pushing on, was brought up standing by a projecting limb, which managed to get beneath his chin and almost lift him off his feet.

"Who's that?" suddenly demanded a gruff voice at his elbow. Blowitz didn't think it prudent to state the particulars about himself, and instantly halted and held his peace.

"What's the matter?" inquired some one else, almost as close to the officer, but on the other side.

"Some galoot is pushing through the wood," replied

the first speaker, "and I shouldn't wonder if it's the one that shot Cal through the shoulder. He jumped off the cars and ran for the trees; we took good care that he didn't get a chance to climb back again on the train, for he's our game."

"I say, helloa!" called the other, addressing the detective, whose situation was anything but pleasant; "answer mighty quick or I'll shoot off my gun."

This bluff was lost on the crouching officer, who comprehended the results of his haste in trying to reach the train. The men were near him; and though they might be able to locate him quite closely, they could not know, as yet, precisely where he was. It was no addition to the comfort of the fugitive that at the moment he was crouching in the gloom, and listening for the approach of the men, who were eager to make short work with him, that he heard the whistle of the receding engine. It sounded all of a half-mile distant; and as the train was going faster every minute, all his hope of becoming a passenger on those cars was gone. It was so unsafe for him to stay where he was that he began a stealthy movement to withdraw from the spot. The night was clear, with a faint moon in the sky, but none of its rays could penetrate the gloomy recesses, where the darkness was so profound that it was literally true that one could not see his hand before his face. And it was lucky for the detective that his vision was utterly useless at such

a time. The rustling of the leaves and branches showed that, although the men that had just spoken were holding their peace for the moment, they were not idle. They were prosecuting the search; and what was more, one of them at least was drawing nearer Blowitz every minute. A collision was inevitable.

The trouble was that the detective could not decide in what direction to proceed; his sole purpose just then was to get away from that particular spot with all haste and secrecy, and he moved stealthily along, all his senses on the alert, and taking the utmost care against betraying himself. The delicacy of his situation may be understood when it is known that he was so placed, that if he moved forward he was likely to bump against one of the men, while, if he took the other course, he was equally certain of striking the other. They were already so near and so liable to swerve to the right or left, that there was little promise of mending matters by anticipating them. But inaction must bring certain detection; and he continued his guarded efforts to get away from the spot, with the painful doubt ever in his mind as to whether he did not make matters worse by doing so. Suddenly there came the moment when he dared not take another step. One of the men was within six feet of where he had halted.

"Helloa, Jim, how're you making out?" called his companion in a husky undertone, almost as close on the other side.

"Hanged if I know! He can't be fur off. Be ready to nail him the minute you learn where he is; I heerd him sneaking along a minute ago; he can't get away if we keep awake."

"Hark!"

The two paused for a minute and listened. Everything in the immediate vicinity was profoundly quiet, but voices could be heard some distance away. It seemed as if the gathering place of the outlaws was near by; for the words of many of the party were plainly distinguishable, as they exchanged coarse jests over the recent occurrence. They were in high spirits because of their success. There could be no doubt that they had made a rich haul; for as I have shown, the south-bound train was unusually crowded that night, and the criminals had cleaned it out most thoroughly. All at once, one of the couple that was so near Blowitz emitted a resounding whistle, that sounded as if it came from a locomotive. It was instantly answered by a similar signal from some point not far off, supplemented by a ringing, "Aye, aye, all right."

The detective needed no one to tell him what this exchange meant. The searchers had called for help, and it would be on the spot in a very few minutes. It would never do for him to stay where he was, even if the first move revealed his precise location. He ad-

vanced one foot, and, holding his traveling-bag in his left hand, extended his right to protect his face. As he did so, it touched something different from the limb of a tree. It was the shoulder of a person.

"Here he is! I've got him, Tom! Up with your"—

Before the command could be completed, Detective Blowitz let fly with his right fist, striking with all the instant strength he could summon. The words of the rogue located his mouth sufficiently close for all practical purposes; and it was at that point Blowitz aimed, if it can be said he aimed, when he saw absolutely nothing. What is more to the point, he landed as straight as a rifle-shot; and the outlaw went down, struck senseless, and with a glimmering idea that his neck was broken. The detective was quick to take advantage of the diversion created by this flurry. Despite the risk, he pushed forward among the limbs and undergrowth, receiving scratches and bruises, and narrowly saving himself from falling prostrate. He had no idea of the course he was following, and could not pause to think. The one thing necessary was to get away from that spot with the least delay possible, and he bent all his energies to the task.

CHAPTER XV.

THE vigorous proceeding on the part of Detective Blowitz was the best and, indeed, the only thing that could have saved him; for the searchers were closing in about him, and were so nigh in fact that, as has been shown, they came in contact. When the surprised desperado went down, his companion was uncertain whether it was he or the one for whom they were groping. The sudden clipping off of his comrade's words suggested that something had happened; but, before its nature could be settled, Blowitz was a hundred feet away. The listening ear might have discovered his course from the rustling that accompanied it, but the detective showed his wisdom during every minute he tried to extricate himself from his dangerous dilemma. Halting in his wild push, he made an abrupt turn to the left, his course being at right angles to the one he had been following, and then advanced with a stealth and a care that he was confident prevented any one hearing him. This move bettered things, for there was no cause for his being caught in such a trap as that from which he had just escaped. None of the miscreants could approach him without betraying himself,

in which event, nothing would be easier than for him to withdraw farther into the woods. One surprising result followed this action of the detective. At the moment of making his second halt, he caught the star-like twinkle of a light among the trees. Since it was in the direction whence had come the murmur of voices, he knew it was the fire around which the criminals were gathered.

"There is nothing to prevent my taking a look at them," he reflected; "and since I have such a surplus of time on my hands, I may as well use it in this way as in another."

Concealed within the impenetrable gloom of the wood, it was easy for him to steal among the trees until he reached a point which afforded a full view of the camp-fire. The sight that met his gaze was picturesque and striking. A roaring fire of pine knots was burning in an open space about twenty feet square, and around it were gathered most of the men that had just taken part in the holding up of the railway train. The masks worn during that interesting episode were now cast aside, and the detective was given as good a view as he could have asked of the faces of the desperadoes. Some were lolling on the ground, a couple were standing, and all were engaged in examining and admiring the booty secured by the criminals. Blowitz counted nine men; and it was evident from their actions

that the leader had already made the partition of the spoils, recent as was the time since it had come into their possession. Probably he was an expert at the business, for his work seemed to have ended without any dissatisfaction.

The detective saw the sparkle and gleam of watches, rings, chains, and jewelry in the hands of the thieves; he observed the greenbacks that their new owners carefully rolled up and stowed away about their persons, with grins of pleasure, enlivened by all sorts of jesting remarks. It was apparent that, if they expected anything in the nature of pursuit, they were confident that a long time must elapse before it could be made, and there was no call for hurry on their part. It followed as a matter of course, that they had the best of horses at command, and that they were near at hand, but nothing could be seen of them from where the detective stood. The men were dressed like cowboys, with broad-brimmed sombreros, thick red shirts, with flowing neckties, cartridge-belts at their waists, trousers tucked in the tops of their boots, to which were attached large spurs and inordinately high heels, terminating in points almost as small as those worn by a fashionable lady. Every one carried a revolver and Winchester, the latter leaning against the adjoining trees, and reflecting the glow from the camp-fire. Some of those faces were undeniably handsome. There were three upon which the

beard was still so young that it showed only in the form of a fuzzy mustache. Their hair was long and curling, dangling about the shoulders, as was the case with all the rest, excepting two, who wore theirs cropped close. The man that it was easy to see was the leader, had a full, heavy beard, plentifully sprinkled with gray. He was older in crime than any of his followers, and ruled them with a rod of iron, because of those years and his experience. Nothing was visible in the way of food, so that there could be little question that the fire had been kindled for no other purpose than to afford a chance for the partition of the booty. That completed to the satisfaction of all (as it was plain had been done), they were not likely to linger long in that neighborhood. Before daylight they would be miles distant, and in the event of pursuit would scatter and disintegrate among the mountains and solitudes, where nothing less than bloodhounds could trace them.

Detective Blowitz fixed the face of each in his memory, for he had in mind the possibility that it might prove useful at some time when the question of identity came up. He smiled grimly at sight of a figure seated on the only stump in sight, with his left arm resting in a sling. His sombrero was shoved back off his head; and his face, long and thin, with mustache and chin whiskers only, showed that he felt anything but comfortable.

"That's the fellow who fired at me and caught it himself," muttered the watcher with no little satisfaction; "it is a pity that he wasn't extinguished altogether. But the rule at such times is that no harm comes to those who deserve it. Helloa!"

The latter exclamation, under the breath, was caused by a sight that gave him more pleasure than what he had just witnessed. Two more of the outlaws walked from the wood into the circle of light thrown out by the camp-fire. They were the couple from whom the detective had just had such a narrow escape. The moment they appeared they received the attention of the others, who began questioning and talking with them in such low voices that the listener could not catch a word that was spoken. But the pleasing feature was the nose of one of the men. The firelight showed that it was about twice its natural size, and it had recently lost a good deal of blood. The owner was still nursing it with his handkerchief, and it must have caused him great suffering.

"That's where my fist landed," was the thought of the detective; "he called out that he had me, but he must be of the opinion now that it was the other fellow who had him."

The detective was certainly entitled to all the comfort to be gained from contemplating the result of his collision with a couple of the outlaws, who deserved

tenfold worse treatment than they received. Blowitz had nothing to gain by hurrying away from the spot, for he had studied the time-tables sufficiently since leaving St. Louis to know that there would be no other train bound south until the following forenoon. What he dreaded was being compelled to walk many miles before reaching a station where he could board the train; but if that proved the case, he had abundance of time at his disposal in which to do it. But it was not to be expected that this party of law-breakers would stay where they were much longer. The despoiled train had been permitted to continue on its way, and ere long would reach some point from which the news of the outrage could be telegraphed to the authorities, who would lose no time in making a vigorous attempt to run down the outlaws. The latter, therefore, would have been rash beyond reason, had they stayed many minutes after dividing their plunder. Detective Blowitz had not waited long, ere he saw from their actions that they were making ready to leave the place. There being no cause for lingering, he turned to steal away, when he became suddenly aware that he was not alone; while he had been stealing upon the outlaws, some one had been stealing upon him.

CHAPTER XVI.

Detective Blowitz recalled the experience of the Frenchman who found it pleasant enough to hunt the tiger, but altogether a different matter when the tiger took it into his head to hunt him. Secure in his hiding-place, he had stood for a number of minutes watching the outlaws, without it once occurring to him that some of them might turn the tables upon him. He was on the point of withdrawing farther into the wood, when he heard a rustling among the bushes within a few feet of him. It could not have been made by the wind, inasmuch as there was no wind blowing. Like a flash the hand of the officer went to his hip, where his revolver rested. He had not eluded the villains thus far to surrender now, when danger impended again. Aware that he must have been in plain sight of any one behind him, because of the glow of the firelight beyond, he was unable to detect the outlines of his enemy, who for that reason possessed an immeasurable advantage over him. But at this critical juncture came a growl, which clearly was not made by a man; some wild animal must have been attracted by the sight of the camp-fire, and was prowling around in quest of

his supper. Immediately after the cavernous sound fell upon his ear, Blowitz observed the dark outlines of an enormous bear lumbering through the wood and almost upon him.

"If you'll let me alone, I'll agree to do the same with you," was the conclusion of the detective, vastly relieved to discover that he was threatened by such a stupid creature, instead of a desperate enemy of his own species.

The brute could not have been much ahungered, or he would have assailed the man without any preliminary introduction. At that season of the year the bruin of the Arkansas wilderness has little trouble in obtaining food, and is not apt to disturb the hunter unless the latter opens hostilities. Blowitz moved nimbly around, so as to flank the beast, and, a minute later, succeeded in placing him between himself and the camp-fire. By this strategy he brought him into plainer view, and was enabled to watch his movements without danger. Having executed this flank movement, he received no further attention from the bear, whose chief interest lay in the direction of the camp-fire. He swung awkwardly toward it, halting when some rods away, evidently afraid to approach so large a body of men, whom he must have learned to hold in dread, as do all creatures that ever serve as game for the lords of creation. But our friend did not care to

lose any more time, nor to endanger himself any more by watching the bear's proceedings; and, as soon as he saw himself beyond the brute's reach, turned his mind upon his own escape out of the wilderness. The detective's series of adventures had led him so far into the pine woods, and had involved him in so many turnings, that he had wholly lost his bearings, and knew not the course to take in order to reach the railway again. His wish was to get there as soon as he could, and to start southward over the ties. In fact, that was all he could do so far as he saw. By traveling long and far enough, he must reach some station where he could board the next train bound to Texas. It might be distant one mile or twenty of them, but he was prepared to face the task whatever it proved; for, as has been shown, he was inclined to take matters philosophically, no matter how discouraging they might appear. The chances were that by following the course which appeared to lead to the railway tracks, he would go wrong; but, inasmuch as he never could accomplish anything by standing still, and possibly might go right, he fixed in his mind what appeared to be the right point of the compass, and moved forward with the same caution he had used from the first. At the end of half an hour, when he found himself still in the depths of the wilderness, he paused with a sigh.

"I'm wrong; more than likely I am farther from the

railway than when I left the camp-fire, but, confound it! what is a fellow to do?"

Striking a match and looking at his watch, he saw that it was between two and three o'clock in the morning. It was a long time yet before any train was likely to pass; but he might well shrink from pushing farther into the woods, with the certainty that he would never be able to extricate himself without help.

"There's one thing I can do," he reflected; "I can stay here till a train goes by in one direction or the other. The rumble will tell me the location of the tracks, and then I can make my way to them; but if that first train happens to be about ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and is the one I want to catch, another dismal delay is before me."

He was asking himself whether, after all, it was not wise to do this. The night was crisp and cool, and though he would not have found it very uncomfortable to sit on the ground, with his back against a tree, the waiting would be of the most monotonous nature. At such times, too, nothing is so trying as idle waiting. There is a relief in motion, even though we know it can accomplish no good. One thing was proven; he had been following the wrong direction and must therefore change it. The right or the left might be the proper one, and that could be determined only by trial. Accordingly, after considering the matter for some min-

utes, he turned sharply to the right, and resumed his tedious work of traveling through the thick growth of pines, where he was forced to depend upon the sense of feeling alone. But, to his astonishment, he had gone only a few paces when he made the gratifying discovery that he had struck a forest path of some kind. Had his own course been at right angles, he might have crossed it without a thought of the fact; but it was nearly parallel, and the first knowledge came when he noticed that the ground under his feet was comparatively free of leaves, and the numerous pine-cones upon which he had been continually treading, while no limbs brushed his face, proved that the trail was quite broad.

"This must be looked into," he decided, halting again, and producing the little rubber safe in which he carried his matches.

Striking one of these, he held the tiny twist of flame above his head, and saw that he was standing in the middle of a well-marked foot-path, which wound in either direction among the trees, disappearing before reaching the margin of the area of light thrown out by his lucifer. He lit several, one after the other, and made his examination as complete as he could. The question he asked himself was whether the horsemen who held up the railway train had used this avenue for approach or withdrawal. Stooping down and scrutinizing the ground, he saw no signs of man or animal

having passed that way lately. The inference was fair that they had not used the path, nor were likely to do so.

"I am quite sure," he mused, after flinging aside the last match, "that this trail leads to the railway, but I'm blessed if I know which course to take. More than likely, in accordance with the law at such times, whichever one I follow will prove the wrong one, and when I awake to the truth, I'll be several miles deeper in these confounded woods."

This was another problem that could be solved only by experiment, since there was no means at command that could give any guidance. Making a guess, therefore, he turned to the left, listening and using his eyes as best he could, whenever a faint ray of moonlight found its way into the trail, over which he was plodding his way. As nearly as he could tell, he had gone about a half a mile when he once more paused. Although nothing like what he hoped rather than expected to see presented itself, he was aware that the path had broadened greatly. He suspected that he had arrived at a clearing which probably marked the terminus of the trail. If such were the fact, it would show that he had followed the wrong course again.

"There's no doubt of it; but unless I'm mistaken," he added peering into the gloom, "yonder is a house of some kind, most likely a settler's cabin."

While Detective Blowitz stood peering into the gloom at one side of the clearing, a light twinkled from one of the windows of the cabin, showing that it was not only occupied, but that the people were astir, despite the lateness of the hour.

CHAPTER XVII.

Now, the officer had no intention of entering the lions' den after his repeated escapes therefrom. The fact of this log structure being so near the scene of the railway robbery, and with the inmates awake at this late hour, was presumptive evidence that some of the outlaws were there, or that their friends were present, despite the fact that the trail showed no signs of the men having passed that way lately on their steeds. But there was one piece of information the officer was exceedingly anxious to obtain: that was the right course to the railway track. Whoever was in the building could enlighten him on that point if he chose. The question was whether it was safe to apply to the individual or individuals for the information. Before doing so, he made a reconnoissance. Not forgetting that no matter how poor a family may be it is likely to own one or more dogs, Blowitz held his weapon ready for use, as he walked across the clearing toward the log structure, which came into plainer view the farther he advanced. It was of the ordinary kind seen in the sparsely settled regions of the South-west, being an almost square building of rough logs, dove-tailed at

the corners, with the interstices filled with clay, and showing a single door and window in front. The only sign of life to be observed was the light shining through the window; but since a curtain was stretched across, nothing could be seen of the interior. In the hope that more might be accomplished from the rear, he passed thither, carefully studying all the points presented, and especially on the lookout for canines, which he held in as much dread as though he were a tramp. Greatly to his relief, however, he completed the circuit without running against any of the brutes. He noticed that there was no rear door, but observed a single upper window, which, being shrouded in darkness, proved that the building contained a second story. Nothing else had been discovered; and, after some hesitation, he stepped nigher to the front window and listened. The curtain fitted so closely that he could not peer around the side; but, after a few minutes, he heard some one walk across the floor. The step was so heavy that he had about concluded it was that of a man, when a shadow just then thrown against the curtain revealed the outlines of a woman. This discovery led Detective Blowitz to decide to apply for admission without more delay. He was not sure of entering the building, but he was confident of securing the knowledge that was so important to him. Passing his hand over the door, he failed to find the latch-string,

which is sometimes hospitably left hanging out for just such late applicants as he. So he knocked smartly on the rough planking, and was instantly answered by the summons, —

"Come in!"

He obeyed, and peering sharply within, saw the form of a tall, gaunt woman standing in the middle of the room, and looking wonderingly at him, as he pushed the door inward and paused on the threshold, as if in doubt whether to enter or stay where he was.

"You are welcome; come in!" she remarked, noticing his hesitation.

The voice was so hearty that Blowitz forgot his misgivings for the moment, and, taking a couple of steps, sat down on the bench near the door, depositing his valise at his feet, and removing his hat with as much deference as if in the presence of a titled lady.

"I don't wish to intrude," he remarked pleasantly; "are you alone?"

"Yes," she answered, keeping her place where he had first seen her; "but I never shut the door in the face of any person, no matter who he is. Who air ye?"

"An unfortunate traveler that has lost his way; I have been wandering about in the woods for the last hour or two, trying to find the railway; but I seem to be getting farther off all the time."

"Ye're a good long way from the railroad," remarked the woman with a grin.

"May I ask how far?"

"Four or five miles," was the astonishing answer.

"And does this path along which I have been traveling cross the tracks?"

"Which way did you come?"

The visitor pointed with his hand to indicate the direction. The woman laughed.

"You have been walking right away from it all the time."

"I might have known it; that is always my luck."

"If you'd kept on long enough, ye'd have fetched up in the Injin nation."

"Or possibly the Rocky Mountains or Pacific Ocean; but I understand you that this path leads to the railway when followed in the right direction?"

"It crosses it and goes over into the Crow Barrens on t'other side."

"I'm much obliged for the information; now, can you tell me how far, after reaching the railway, I shall be from the nearest station where I can board a train?"

This question was not answered as readily as the other. The woman bent her head a moment, and looked down at the floor, as if in deep thought. Then she walked slowly to the other side of the room and sat down on a dilapidated chair.

"I can't answer ye that."

"Have you never traveled on the cars?"

"Never; my old man tried to get me on a good many times, but I won't trust 'em. I'm satisfied to ride on hoss or mule back, or to hoof it when I want to do any traveling."

The caller smiled at the earnestness of the woman, even though disappointed in obtaining the information he wanted.

"How is it your husband is not with you?"

"I'm expecting him back soon; he's been gone a couple of days with Jim and Dick."

"They are your sons, I suppose?"

"Yes; and two likely boys they be too," replied the woman proudly.

"I don't doubt it; and I don't doubt, too, that you deserve a good husband and sons and daughters."

"Never had a daughter," was the sententious reply; "but the boys are all right. I s'pose the old man is too, though he mought be better without hurting him."

"May I ask whether you expect them to-night?"

"Can't say; they went back in the hills on a hunt day afore yesterday, and said they mought be gone till the last part of the week."

"Are you not up late?" asked the detective, who, although prepossessed by the simple hospitality of the woman, was not quite satisfied with the appearance of things.

The question seemed to strike her as very funny, for she shook with laughter.

"Ye're off thar, stranger; I ain't up late, but am up airly. I went to bed about sundown last night, got all the sleep I wanted, and am jes' makin' ready to begin my day's work, so as to have things fixed for the old man and boys when they do come."

This was a new way of putting it, and Detective Blowitz was compelled to smile in turn. Glancing at his watch, he observed that it was past four o'clock, no earlier than many persons are accustomed to rise even in the thickly settled East. Necessity is an unrelenting master; and this poor woman, compelled to minister to the wants of the three grown-up members of her family, doubtless found little time for rest or idleness. She followed the old adage of retiring and rising early, and doing with her might all that her hands found to do.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Detective Blowitz, during this brief conversation with the woman who had received him so hospitably, was conscious of an uncomfortable misgiving that everything was not what it seemed. This feeling was caused rather by what he heard than by what he saw. The interior and the woman herself were not displeasing. She was strong, homely of feature, gaunt and muscular, and evidently one who regarded her whole duty in life as that of laboring for others. The room was furnished plainly, but with a certain neatness and thrift that were noticeable from the first. A bright fire was burning on the hearth, and the table set at one side of the room showed that she was preparing her morning meal. He noticed that there were four plates set, indicating that she was looking for the return of her husband and sons. The candle added its light to that of the fire on the hearth, and rendered everything in the large room visible. A slanting ladder connected with the upper story, which was reached through an opening, barely large enough to admit the passage of a full-grown man. Two chairs, a bench, and several smaller articles made up the furniture below stairs. While a

shake-down might be used at times on the lower floor to accommodate visitors, it was apparent that the sleeping of the family was done above. It was the remark of the woman that her husband and sons had been absent on a hunt that might last several days which caused him mental disquiet. He asked himself whether they were not likely to be members of that party that only a short time before had held up the railway train. Doubtless they would form valuable members of it if their inclinations led them in that direction. As for the woman herself, she seemed honest. Her looks and manner indicated it. She showed a simplicity and kindness that he could not associate with crime. So far as she was concerned, he was quite sure nothing was to be feared. He had learned that which he sought: several miles along the forest trail would take him to the railway from which he had wandered, and once there, he would be able to extricate himself from his unpleasant situation without further trouble.

The most obvious course for him, now that he knew all that was to be learned, was to leave. It would be much more pleasant to rest a while, eating breakfast some hours later, and then following the path to his destination. But prudence whispered that this meant danger. Those desperadoes were probably somewhere in the neighborhood. Although they had not ridden along the path in the woods, they might yet do so, and

stop at the cabin for their morning meal. Even if they did not come, the presence of the three men living there was likely to complicate matters to a perilous extent. Blowitz was turning these questions over in his mind, in doubt whether to ask the privilege of going to the upper story and lying down before taking his breakfast, or whether to leave without further parley, when the woman arose from the chair and gave her attention to some food that was preparing over the blaze. The gentleman did not forget that while his hostess might be open to suspicion, she had equally good cause to regard him with the same feeling; for the appearance of a well-dressed stranger, carrying a valise, and a number of miles from the railway, was enough to rouse curiosity on the part of any one.

"I s'pose," said she with a smile, "that you ain't used to gettin' up so airly."

"No; this is the best time for me to stay in bed."

"If you like, you can go up-stairs and lay down for a nap; I'll call you when sunup comes, and you can git breakfast and start off whenever you've a mind."

"You have treated me very kindly, and I thank you; but I'm anxious to reach the nearest railway station, so as to hurry on my way. If I stay here too long I will miss the cars. That will cause a long delay, for the passenger trains are not numerous over this road."

"You ain't afeared?"

The woman, who was moving about the room, stopped short in front of the detective and shot out this question like a bullet. Her small black eyes twinkled, and an indescribable expression passed over her features. Blowitz did not know what it all meant. But he laughed quite heartily as he asked in turn, —

"What would I be afraid of? You don't look dangerous."

"But when my old man and boys come home, why I was thinking you mought be afeared of them."

"Do they treat strangers badly when you have been kind to them?"

"It ain't that; I didn't say they did. But I asked you if you wasn't afeared of them."

"No; you told me they might not be back for several days to come."

"And I also said they might come this morning; but you needn't be afeared. Go up-stairs and sleep as long as you want to, and when you have done you can have breakfast and go on your way."

Under an impulse, which the man did not himself understand, he rose quickly, grip-sack in hand, and walked to the foot of the ladder. He climbed three rounds and then stopped, surprised at his own imprudence. How could he know that he was not walking straight into a trap from which there was no withdrawal? He saw the woman watching him narrowly,

and he would have given much could he have guessed the thoughts passing through her mind at that moment.

"What a fool I am," he concluded, descending the rounds as hastily as he had climbed them.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "You act as though you was afeared."

"I told you that I am afraid of losing time. I think I'll bid you good-by, for I am a long way from where I want to go."

"Where's that?"

"Texas."

"Did you fall off the kyars?"

Blowitz laughed outright.

"Hardly as bad as that; but the train was robbed, and I slipped off and hid in the woods. While I was doing that the car started and I was left behind."

She showed astonishment at this statement, raising her hands and heaving a great sigh of relief.

"That's what comes of folks riding on them plaguey kyars; you'll never catch me on 'em, no, never."

Detective Blowitz stepped to the door and placed his hand on the latch, when a sharp call from the outside said, —

"Helloa, in there!"

Instead of opening the door, he moved to the window and drew the corner of the curtain aside, so as to permit him to peep out. In the dim moonlight, he dis-

cerned the figures of a dozen horsemen drawn up in an irregular circle on the small clearing in front of the log cabin. They were not fifty feet from the front door.

He knew on the instant who they were; the train-robbers were on their return from the scene of their misdoings, and had halted at the cabin to obtain food. A pretty situation in which to be caught!

"Don't let them know I am here," whispered Blowitz, withdrawing from the window, as she hastened to the door. She made no answer, but raising the latch, presented herself to the view of the free-riders, who saw her tall figure outlined against the yellow light in the room.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Can you fix us up a breakfast?"

"Tell them no," whispered Blowitz; but the woman either did not hear, or, hearing, did not heed his wishes.

"I reckon I can do something for you," was the reply that almost caused Detective Blowitz's hair to stand on end.

CHAPTER XIX.

It was too late to check the woman, even if she would have allowed herself to be checked. If Detective Blowitz had hesitated and turned back from his previous essay to climb the primitive stairs, he was far from doing so now. He caught up his valise, and hurrying to the foot of the ladder, went to the top as nimbly as a monkey. All was dark above, the only lighting that which came through the opening from the lower floor. This enabled him to note that the second story was divided into two apartments, and without hesitating, he entered the one that contained the small window he had noticed on his first reconnoissance. He moved as lightly as possible, and as his knees touched the side of a bed, sat down, listened, and awaited the development of events.

Meanwhile, the hostess had acted upon her first hospitable instinct. Her answer to the question of the outlaws caused a general dismounting on their part, and the next minute they came trooping into the lower story, boisterous, good-natured, and generous.

"Come, old woman," called one, "get us up something to eat as quick as you know how, and we'll pay you well for it."

"I'll do the best I can, but I don't want any pay."

"None of that! we pay as we go. Where's your old man?"

"He and the boys are off hunting; I'm expecting them back, and they'll growl when they find you've eat all their breakfast."

"They won't kick when you tell them the price we paid for it," was the comforting response of another of the party, who were disposing themselves about their cramped quarters as best they could, while waiting for their meal.

In his hiding-place above stairs, Detective Blowitz felt a thrill of pleasurable surprise from the question of the visitors about the absent husband. That was proof that he and his sons did not belong to the marauders that had been guilty of the crime of robbing the railway train. "I have done them an injustice," was the conclusion of the officer.

A few minutes later the odor of tobacco stole up through the opening. The party was smoking, while they chatted and exchanged jokes and good-natured remarks. The woman was not silent by any means. She was one of those who could talk while she worked.

"What's the matter with your arm?" she asked of the fellow that was seated on the bench, vacated a minute before by the first caller, and whose face plainly showed his suffering.

"My horse throwed me," was the unblushing response of the man, who did not care that she should know the truth.

"I should think you was old enough to know how to ride," was the comment of the woman, that caused a laugh on the part of the others, while the victim groaned.

"What's the matter with your nose?" was her next inquiry, addressed to the one that had come in collision with the fist of Detective Blowitz.

"He fell down and stepped on it," was the explanation offered by one of his companions.

"He made a bad mess of it," commented the woman, joining in the laugh; "it looks like an over-ripe tomater."

"Never mind about my nose," growled the owner of that injured organ; "you just tend to getting us something to eat; I'd like to meet the man that give me that blow — that's all!"

"So you had a quarrel, eh? s'pose you're one of them that's been robbin' the kyars."

This was an unfortunate remark. It caused amazement among the party, and sent a shiver of dread through the listener up-stairs, for the question that followed he was sure was coming.

"What do you know about robbing the cars?" demanded one of the visitors.

"I heerd about it — never mind how," replied the woman, who must have perceived her mistake.

"But who told you?" insisted the first speaker; "we must know about it."

"I guess you're the folks that done it, you're so touchy, and have plenty of watches and gold chains hanging 'bout you, and, from the way you talk, ain't lacking money."

"You haven't answered my question," said the other sternly; "how did you learn anything about a train being held up?"

"I was told it; how'd you s'pose I would know?"

"But who told you?"

"Jim Haney."

"Who's Jim Haney?"

"He lives back in the woods about a mile from here; he rid by a half-hour ago, and stopped at the door and halloed to know if my old man was to home; when I told him he warn't, he said a party of men had held up the kyars and stolen everything from the passengers, killed the engineer and conductor, and blowed up the engine."

This graphic narrative caused an explosion on the part of the listeners; and though Detective Blowitz could not indorse actual deception on the part of any one, he felt like calling down blessings on the woman whose quick wit had come to her aid in a crisis that promised ill to him.

"She's true blue," was his conclusion; "she doesn't mean to betray me, and if those fellows don't grow too curious, I'm as safe here as if a dozen miles away."

But his congratulations were premature. While the men were waiting for their meal, they could not keep quiet. A couple went outside to look after the horses, others moved about the room, and erelong one of them betrayed an interest in the upper story.

"Is there anybody up there?" he asked, walking to the foot of the ladder, where he paused and faced toward the woman, as he addressed his question to her.

"Why, who would be up there?" she asked in return. "Didn't I tell you that the old man and boys ain't to home? Them's our bedrooms, and you ain't any right to go nosing round in what's none of your bus'ness," she added with a show of indignation.

"Don't get too skittish; we ain't going to hurt anything; but I feel kind of tired and would like to lay down till you get the grub ready."

"I don't think it's nice for you to treat me that way," remarked the woman in an aggrieved voice; but her protest was wasted on the man, who, with a laugh, began ascending the ladder.

The detective in the room above allowed nothing to escape him. He heard every word, and the sound of the man's feet on the rounds of the ladder warned him of what was coming. Blowitz rose noiselessly from the

the bed on which he was sitting, and stood erect in the corner of the room, farthest from the window. There was no door to the apartment, so he could not avail himself of the protection which otherwise would have been given him. As he glided to his position like a shadow, he rested his hand on his hip, resolved that if the worst came, he would not allow his visitor to get the drop on him.

"If he discovers me I'll fire, and then scramble out of the window and take to the woods," was the decision he reached, with no more perturbation of manner than when talking with the woman below. The latter could not stop the man from going up the ladder, for, had she shown too much alarm, it would have awakened suspicion on the part of her callers. But she must have had curious feelings while preparing the meal for the robbers. It looked as if a crisis had come, and the liveliest kind of music was impending. But she had done her level best, and the pleasant gentleman ensconced above her head must now look out for himself.

CHAPTER XX.

THE outlaw came nimbly up the ladder, his manner showing that he had no thought of anything amiss. He was probably prompted by the spirit of mischief or curiosity, and his exuberance of spirits over the success attending the robbery of the train by himself and comrades. After stepping off the ladder he had but a few paces to go, when he reached the opening leading to the room where Detective Blowitz, with his hand resting on his revolver, quietly awaited the critical moment. He might take it into his head to go into the other apartment, in which case there was nothing to fear, unless others of the band should become of an investigating turn of mind. Blowitz drew a faint sigh of relief on hearing the footsteps in the adjoining room; but his fears returned the next minute when the miscreant, as if dissatisfied with the things there, withdrew and turned to the other apartment. Shrinking in his corner, Blowitz saw, by the aid of the faint illumination from below, the outlines of the shaggy head, burly shoulders, and the sombrero, which the owner had not removed upon entering the building. He stood as if in doubt whether to enter or withdraw. The detective

either saw, or fancied he saw, the huge hat move, as though the man was peering around in the gloom. The question instantly presented itself, —

"If he happens to look at this corner, will he see me and the valise at my feet?"

It was impossible to tell, but there was something disquieting in the actions of the fellow. After completing his survey, he appeared to change his mind about lying down. He turned away and the next minute was heard descending the ladder.

"I half believe he saw me," thought Blowitz, appreciating his perilous position.

If it should prove that he was discovered, his situation would become a terrible one. Concealment of his identity was impossible, and an attack was sure to follow. If it did, he would take his place at the head of the ladder, and with revolver in hand make the best fight he knew how. His advantage would be great; for he could keep himself out of range, while every one that attempted to approach him must bring his head into the direct line of fire. This was well enough; but what could one man do against a dozen, armed with Winchesters as well as pistols? A siege must bring him to terms; for nothing in the nature of help was possible in this lonely region, where the desperadoes were free to work their own sweet will. But Erastus Blowitz was not the zany to invite any such

frightful conflict so long as it was possible to avert it. The outlaw was hardly at the bottom of the ladder when the detective stepped to the window. The sash was in two parts, the lower being arranged so that it could be raised and fastened with a nail. This opened the window to half its extent. To open it all the way the sash must be removed from its fastenings, and it looked as if this was necessary. The lower portion was raised and fastened without any noise. Peering out, Blowitz saw nothing in the gloom to cause alarm, and, with only a moment's pause, he reached downward as far as he could and dropped his valise. The thump was faintly heard, and he feared he had attracted the notice of those inside, who just then were talking in lower tones than usual.

"I guess I can do it," he muttered, after a hasty examination of the opening; "it will be a tight squeeze, but will work, if I don't have any accident."

Buttoning his coat as closely about him as he could, he made ready for the trial. The distance was so slight that, after hanging by his two hands, he had but a few feet to fall, and the shock would be too slight to be regarded. He paused for a minute and listened to the voices below stairs. A strange hush seemed to have fallen on them, as though they were conferring in whispers or low tones. This was so suspicious, that he was almost certain he had been detected, and the out-

laws were trying to agree upon the best manner of blotting him out of existence. Be that as it may, every second was so momentous that he dared not linger to learn the truth. He was in the act of pushing his feet through the opening, when he drew back in consternation. The two men that had passed outside some minutes before had halted directly opposite the rear window, where they stood conversing in low tones. As Blowitz studied them, he observed that the faint light was growing stronger. Daybreak was coming, and every minute that he stayed in the cabin increased his danger. While waiting for the couple to move, Blowitz stepped softly to the head of the ladder and listened.

"I thought you said there wasn't any one up-stairs," said the fellow that had descended a few minutes before, addressing the hostess.

"I didn't say no such thing," was the truthful response; "and it's none of your bus'ness who's there."

"Who is it?" demanded the leader, his voice showing that he was in deadly earnest.

"How can I know when I didn't ask his name?"

"Was he a man, well-dressed, with a stiff, small-brimmed hat, and carrying a valise?"

The woman evidently concluded that it was useless to attempt any further deception, and she answered in the affirmative. The questioner uttered a low whistle, and the others were intensely interested.

"It's the identical galoot," observed the outlaw; "the same one that sent a bullet through your shoulder, Sam, and smashed your nose for you, Hal."

"I'm glad we've got him treed," observed the last-named individual, gingerly nursing his injured organ; "I believe he's one of them detectives that's looking for us any way; we'll cook his goose for him, eh, Bill?"

"I should say so," grunted the one appealed to; "but we mustn't forget that he'll fight; how are we going to get him down from his place up-stairs?"

"If we can't do any better, we'll burn the old cabin."

"Do what?" demanded the astounded woman, turning fiercely on the fellow that had made the remark.

"Don't fret," was the laughing reply; "we'll only do it as a last resort, and when we do, we'll pay you more than the old shanty is worth."

"I'd like to see you try it!" she exclaimed, in a towering passion; "I'll shoot the first one that raises his finger to harm anything of mine!"

"All you've got to do is to hurry up with the breakfast, which you ought to have had ready long ago"—

At that moment the reports of firearms were heard on the outside. The men sprang to their feet and seized their Winchesters, that had been leaning against the wall in different parts of the room. Their first thought was the sheriff and his *posse*. They were not

the men to surrender while a fighting chance remained. They dashed out-of-doors pell-mell, as eager for the fray as if no possible danger impended. Seeing no one in front, they ran to the rear, where a strange sight met their eyes.

A man, with a valise in one hand, was speeding like a deer across the clearing, with two of the outlaws in hot pursuit. He had not only fired his pistol, but had wounded one of his pursuers as badly as the fellow that tried to stop him when he leaped off the rear platform of the railway train. Before the astonished desperadoes could bring their rifles to their shoulders, the fugitive darted among the sheltering trees and was seen no more.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE sun of a bright, crisp, autumn day was fairly above the horizon, when a man looking very tired, and carrying a valise, emerged from the pine woods of Arkansas, and climbed the slight elevation leading to the tracks of the St. Louis and Iron Mountain Railway. Something like a grim smile crossed his pleasing face, as he hummed the words of that song, quite popular a generation ago : —

> "Oh, ain't I glad I's out ob de wilderness,
> Out ob de wilderness, out ob de wilderness?'

Detective Blowitz, after a stirring and interesting experience, had managed to locate himself once more. The day was fairly begun when he turned his face southward and continued his journey toward Texas by walking over the ties of the railway.

"I can sympathize with the strolling players," he mused; "but all the same, I would give twenty-five dollars if a passenger train would come along and pick me up."

He was plucky, however, and walked a half-mile before seeing a solitary person. This settler, when

applied to, displayed the marvelous ignorance that seems to attach to every person who has the best opportunity of acquiring knowledge waiting at their doors. He believed the next station was about a mile distant, but he wasn't sure whether it was a station after all. He would find out some day, and let the inquirer know. The latter thanked him and pushed on, anxious to reach some point where he could board the first train for the south. Much better fortune than he dared to expect awaited him. He had not walked the distance named by the ignoramus, when he reached a station large enough to contain a fairly good restaurant. The "Arkansas Traveler" felt like a famishing wolf, and made a meal that caused the attendants to stare. Then, after swallowing a cup of steaming coffee and lighting a cigar, he became a new man. The down train was due within the following fifteen minutes, and what was far more to the point, it was not tardy. By the time the weed was finished, the engine rounded the curve, and took aboard the detective, tired enough to find the rest on the cushioned seats as delicious as sleep after long deprival of that boon.

When the conductor came for his ticket, and the detective found it necessary to explain that he was a passenger on the train that was held up, he became an object of interest, and had to answer many questions. The official gave the gratifying news that a vigorous

pursuit had been set on foot by the sheriff and a large *posse* as soon as news reached him, and there was reason to believe that the gang would be extirpated. It may as well be said, in this place, that this hope was realized, so far as the extinguishment of the outlaws was concerned. The fatality that led them to linger in the vicinity of their crime resulted in woful disaster to them. The sheriff hastily summoned a body of men as brave as himself, and who were fully as familiar as the criminals with the country. They improved every minute, and descended upon the marauders like a cyclone, killing several, and capturing most of the others before they could scatter in flight. The fight took place near the cabin in which the detective sought information, and where he came near winding up his life of varied adventure.

But matters now moved smoothly. No knowledge, such as he was hunting for, was to be expected on the train, and he did not look for it. He slept most of the time until they arrived at Texarkana, where he proceeded westward to Dallas. There he halted for one night, and made a little investigation through the town. Nothing new was learned; and he continued his journey without interruption to Austin, the capital, where he lay over again. In this handsome town he struck something. Almost the first name noticed on the registry of the Commerce Hotel was "Fred Wilton,

New York City." It was written three days before, so that the pursuer was closer upon him than he suspected. On inquiry, he was told that the young man had left on the preceding morning for San Antonio. This was good news, and seemed to indicate that Ned Melton, having gone thus far without detection, felt so secure that he was not afraid to tell a good deal about himself. It was necessary for the detective to remain several hours in the capital, and he spent most of the time in making guarded inquiries of the few jewelry stores. He suspected that the fugitive had disposed of more of the diamonds in this place, where the sale would be attended with little danger to himself. But, so far as could be learned, nothing of the kind had been done.

"The price he received from Mr. Parson in St. Louis was enough to last him a good while. He is not extravagant in his habits, and will be sure to take good care of his funds."

"I wonder what attraction led him to San Antonio? Can it be that he has taken into his head to adopt the wild vagabond life of the ranchero? I don't wonder that it tempts many persons; but those that yield to it soon have the romance taken out of them."

From Austin, Detective Blowitz proceeded direct to the quaint and interesting city of San Antonio, with its historic Alamo, its mission houses, its polyglot population, and its many characteristics of ancient

Spain. The pleasant autumn day was drawing to a close when he left the cars at the station, and walked the short distance to the Menger Hotel, the most widely known resort in the place. With more agitation than he would have been willing to confess, the officer began an examination of the register. There it was, "Fred Wilton, New York City," in the same up and down handwriting that had become familiar to him. The date showed that he had arrived just twenty-four hours before his pursuer, who, by a singular coincidence, was assigned to the room immediately adjoining that of the young man.

"Do you know whether Mr. Wilton is in?" he asked of the clerk.

"I will see," was the reply, as the official summoned one of the boys.

The detective thought it best to use an assumed name on this occasion. He feared that Ned Melton, finding himself run down, would do something rash or refuse to see him at all. That would render necessary means which were likely to defeat the purpose that had brought Blowitz thus far.

The detective penciled on a card the words, "John Guyon," the same as he had written on the register, adding, "Would like to see you a few moments on business." The servant speedily came down-stairs with word that Mr. Wilton was not in his room.

"I forgot," said the clerk; "he hired a carriage and drove out to the mission houses; I expected him back before this."

But for this answer, the officer would have suspected deception, and that the youth was in his room, too suspicious to admit a stranger. The latter now went to his own apartment. Before doing so, he took back the card and destroyed it, telling the clerk that he need not mention his call to Mr. Wilton, as he would apply in person at his room.

Blowitz arranged his baggage for an indefinite stay; and then, as nothing remained for him to do but to wait, he threw himself on the bed. He decided to remain there until the return of Melton, afraid that he might learn of his inquiry and take the alarm.

"He will be certain to come here first on his return, and I will make sure he does not escape me."

A half-hour later a brisk step was heard in the hall. Blowitz rose from the bed and donned his coat. The guest paused at the next door, a key was inserted in the lock and turned, showing that "Fred Wilton" had arrived at last. The next moment the detective rapped on the door, and obeyed the summons, "Come in."

CHAPTER XXII.

Detective Blowitz was veteran enough in his profession to consider himself proof against surprise, while sufficient has been told to prove that he possessed nerve; but when, in response to the welcome, he opened the door of Fred Wilton in the Menger Hotel, San Antonio, he was so dumfounded that he stood for a moment transfixed. His lips were parting with the words meant for Ned Melton, when he saw that it was not Ned Melton that stood before him, but an individual whom he had never seen before. He was about the age of his young friend, good-looking, with a bright business air, and the face that was turned inquiringly on the visitor would have pleased any person. He was standing in the middle of the room at the moment the rap sounded; and as he uttered the words bidding the caller enter, he stepped forward to open the door himself.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" was the first exclamation that fell from the detective while standing and staring at the youth.

"You seem surprised," was the pleasant remark of the host; "sit down, and tell me what I can do for you?"

The detective uttered a sigh, and he accepted the invitation as though he was faint and weak. He quickly rallied, however, and was able to laugh, as he remarked, —

"I may as well own up; I have made one of the most egregious blunders of my life."

"Mistakes are liable to occur in the best regulated families," observed the young man, in the same manner he had shown from the first.

"Is your name Fred Wilton?"

"So I was christened."

"Do you know Ned Melton?"

"Very well; he is one of the finest fellows I ever met, and I can't help thinking there's some dreadful mistake about that business in New York."

"You travel for Shipman & Gumbridge?"

"I have done so for a couple of years; I never had better employers, and they will be pleased at the result of my trip."

"Well," added Blowitz with another laugh, "I am on the confession stool and will own up to everything. I have been hunting for Melton, and was confident I was on his trail; but it turns out that it was you, instead of he, whom I was pursuing."

It was Wilton's turn to indulge in mirth. Dropping in his chair, he threw back his head, and made the room echo with his laughter.

"That's the first time I was ever taken for an embezzler or thief, to put it in plain English. What placed me under the ban?"

"Well, in the first place, a general description of you will fit one of Melton; next there is a similarity between your surnames; then you happened to leave New York for the South-west about the time that Melton disappeared, and in St. Louis you sold a diamond."

"That is all true; my brother presented several to me, and I have disposed of them where I could make the best bargain; I wouldn't have had to inquire in St. Louis where the best dealer could be found, had that not been my first trip there. Allow me to hand you my card."

And with the courtesy of a true gentleman, Fred Wilton extended one of his business cards to Detective Blowitz, who glanced at it long enough to read the name, and the announcement that he represented the house of Shipman & Gumbridge, Maiden Lane, New York.

"Your credentials are satisfactory," said the officer with a smile; "as nearly as I can figure out, without going into particulars, I am about eighteen hundred miles off the track, unless Melton is somewhere in this neighborhood."

"I haven't the remotest idea where he is, but I

would give my year's salary if his innocence could be proven."

"So would I!" exclaimed the officer so emphatically that young Wilton looked at him in surprise.

"Professional detectives generally talk just the other way."

"And so would I in any case in which Ned Melton was not concerned. Shipman & Gumbridge could not be more distressed than you and I are; and the prime purpose of my hunting for him is that he may be brought back to the right path before straying off too far."

Wilton looked thoughtfully at the ceiling, his handsome face showing that he was greatly grieved.

"I have thought much about Ned since I started on this trip. We were never very intimate, but the more I saw of him the better I liked him."

"He was a noble young man."

"I have never forgotten him since leaving home, and the hope that I might run across him somewhere and be able to give him help has made me keep my ears and eyes open."

"Have you learned anything?"

"Nothing at all. I believe that if he went West from New York he took a different course from us; and though you may not be as far off the track as you just said you were, I guess you are a good way from it."

"There can be no question as to that," said the detective grimly; "in fact, I am so far off that I don't believe I shall be able to get back again."

The acquaintance begun in this curious manner, by Detective Blowitz and Fred Wilton, rapidly grew into real friendship. Both admired Ned Melton, and this was a bond of sympathy. They dined together, and after dark strolled through the city of the Alamo, discussing the subject that filled their minds. Wilton had arranged to leave for Houston the next morning, while Blowitz decided to return to New York by way of Chicago. This enabled them to ride in company to San Marcos, where they parted, the officer proceeding at a leisurely rate through the Indian Territory, thence to Kansas City, Hannibal, and Chicago. Convinced that the other route had not been followed by the fugitive he wasted no time on it, but made the best investigation possible at the points named. He formed the theory that Ned Melton had gone to Chicago, and then directly westward, hiding himself somewhere in the vast expanse of country stretching from British America to Mexico. While engaged in this almost hopeless task, he wrote a long letter to Shipman & Gumbridge, frankly confessing the blunder he had made, and adding that little hope was left of finding the missing youth. Still, he meant to keep up the hunt for a time; since his experience, even in this case,

had taught him that success often comes in the most unexpected, inexplicable manner. The officer was on the point of mailing his letter when it occurred to him that possibly some news might have come to his employers bearing upon his own actions. He added a request to his missive that if such was the fact they would telegraph him at the Palmer House, Chicago. This was the first communication he had made to them since leaving New York, so that they might have had important tidings for several days, without the means of acquainting him with it. The journey from Texas to the Windy City was tantalizing in one respect. At several points he struck what looked like promising clews, but a slight investigation showed they were blind ones, leading nowhere. It was nearly a week later that he entered the Palmer House of Chicago, and registering, inquired whether there were any letters or telegrams for him. There was no letter, but a telegram had been waiting a couple of days for him. As he suspected, it was from Shipman & Gumbridge, and the contents were interesting, —

"Come home at once, have news of the highest importance."

"It wouldn't have hurt them to tell what their news is," muttered Detective Blowitz; "I shall have to wait till I reach New York to learn."

CHAPTER XXIII.

We have followed Detective Blowitz so long and so far in his hunt for the missing Ned Melton, that we may appear to have forgotten that another individual, in the person of James McCutcheon, the most intimate friend of the youth, was engaged on the same task; but it struck us best to finish the narrative of the professional's efforts before taking up that which proved to be the final and successful search for the lad who had left his guardian's roof with the resolution of never returning again. You will recall that the two trailers, as they may be considered, proceeded from radically different starting-points; the professional, much against his will, was obliged to believe that Ned Melton had stolen the missing diamonds, while the clerk insisted, in the face of what seemed positive proof to the contrary, that his friend was innocent. The result was a divergence of the two methods. Knowing the proud spirit of Melton, McCutcheon was certain that he would not leave his home owing his uncle a penny, even though it took his last dollar. This would reduce his means to such a low figure that he could not go far, unless on foot. He must stop at some point not far removed from New York to earn more money.

"He has had enough probably to carry him to Philadelphia, where he has sought employment. He has found it impossible, or at least very hard, to succeed, because he used an assumed name and could furnish no recommendations."

This was the conclusion that led McCutcheon to the Quaker City, where his search convinced him that Ned had not gone as far even as that point from his home.

"He has stopped at some town between here and Jersey City, and may be tramping in this direction. I will get off at the principal stations in turn and find out what can be learned."

He followed this programme. He did not consider it worth while to leave the train at Germantown Junction, the first stop, because that is in the suburbs of Philadelphia, but kept on to Bristol, where he spent two hours, while waiting for the next train, with the result that, so far as he could determine, Ned Melton had not visited that little town. True, he might be mistaken, but he was so far convinced of the opposite that he lost no time in starting for Trenton. And it was on this train that McCutcheon received another proof of the fact already stated, that, in a business like that on which he was engaged, success is frequently the result of pure accident for which the searcher is not entitled to any credit. The clerk did not possess Ned Melton's social disposition. That youth made acquaintances and

friends wherever he went. On his journey to Philadelphia McCutcheon did not exchange a word with any one except when seeking some clew to his friend, but he now forced himself to act contrary to his inclination by approaching those in whom he felt no personal interest.

It happened that the train in which he was riding was an accommodation one with few passengers. Near the middle of the car sat a young man about his own age, who, having finished reading the newspaper, flung it down in the seat beside him, and looked up with a slight degree of interest at the three people who entered the car. An impulse led McCutcheon to seat himself directly in front of the youth, whose bronzed face, muscular build, and healthy look showed that he was one of those young Americans who believe in sunlight and exercise.

"The next stopping-place of this train I believe is Trenton?" was the inquiring remark of McCutcheon, looking around at the stranger who replied, —

"No; we stop at Tullytown and Morrisville; this isn't a lightning express, but it grabs ground between stations."

"Do you go to Trenton?

"That's where I live."

"This train I think goes no farther?"

"No; but you needn't wait long there, if you want to go to New York or over the Belvidere Division."

"I think I will stop over," said McCutcheon, as though he was not quite sure of his intention, "though I never have been in Trenton."

"It isn't a very big city," replied the other, showing by his readiness that he was quite glad to continue the conversation; "but it's growing fast, and of course you know it is the capital of the State."

"I am looking for a young friend," continued McCutcheon after a pause, "and I suspect he visited Trenton something over a week ago."

This statement on first thought may sound unwise, since it revealed a condition of things that required explanation. But McCutcheon weighed his words before uttering them. The young man looked inquiringly at him, but was too courteous to ask what might appear to be an impertinent question.

"He is a dear friend," added the clerk, "but he has had trouble and we fear is a little off. His acquaintances are very anxious about him, and I have started to hunt him up."

"Why don't you advertise for information of him?"

"You can understand how distressing that might prove; we don't want him to know how he is regarded, and, if he is not quite himself, the publicity would be likely to put him on his guard and make the search the more difficult."

"I see; I wish I could give you help; perhaps I can, if you will tell me his name."

McCutcheon hesitated only a moment.

"It is Edmund Melton, and his home is in New York."

"Is that the fellow who saved a man from drowning at Ocean Beach last August?"

"It is; do you know anything about that case?"

"I stood on the beach and saw it with lots of other people; it was the bravest thing I ever witnessed. Are you looking for him?"

"Yes."

"Why I saw him early last week."

"Where?" asked the astonished clerk.

"At Trenton; he did get off there; I went home on this same train that day."

"It couldn't have been that he had just arrived, for he left New York about midnight."

"It wasn't at the station that I saw him. I went to the Trenton House — that's our principal hotel — to meet my cousin, when I saw him sitting on the porch. I had never spoken to him, except to congratulate him at Ocean Beach on what he did; but as about every one there did the same he could have had no recollection of me. I admired the fellow so much that I was tempted to make his acquaintance, but he looked low-spirited and preoccupied and I was afraid he would resent it."

"Then nothing passed between you?"

"No; but if I had suspected what you tell me, I

would have taken him in hand and been proud to do so. I am sorry that I did not."

"Was that the last you saw of him?"

"No; that afternoon my cousin and I took a carriage ride; we drove to the Asylum, which is about two miles north of Trenton, and were returning, when we met your friend walking along the river road carrying a small valise, and stepping as lively as if training for a walking-match. He looked up at us as we came opposite and bowed; but it was mere politeness, and I am sure he had no memory of me."

"And was that the last you saw of him?"

"Yes; I told my cousin about his exploit at Ocean Beach, or Belmar as they now call it, and he was so interested that he looked around at Melton, who was just disappearing from sight, and wanted me to drive back and invite him to go home with us. What a pity we did not, for much sorrow might have been saved."

"It was very kind to think of him, but it would have done no good. He is too proud to accept hospitality like that, though fully appreciating your motives in tendering it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

McCutcheon's heart was stirred with a profound sympathy for his astray friend. He saw him plodding through the lonely country, where he was unacquainted with a single person, oppressed by the great load that never ought to have rested on his shoulders. He did not deserve it, and others were more blamable than he.

"He does not act like a thief," was his thought; "for had he sold any of the diamonds, he would have enough money to ride instead of being compelled to walk. Poor Ned! where are you now?"

The clerk decided on his course of action before leaving the cars at Trenton. He exchanged cards with his new acquaintance, who promised to hold the matter a secret, and showed his confidence in McCutcheon by accompanying him to a livery-stable and vouching for him when he asked to hire a horse and carriage.

"I may be gone several days," he explained; "and I hope you will not be alarmed or send out officers to trace me."

"If Jim here says it's all right," said the liveryman, jerking his thumb toward the other youth, "I'm satisfied."

"It's all right," was the hearty response of that young gentleman, whereupon McCutcheon, having absorbed all the information he could concerning the roads north of the city, climbed into the carriage and rode off at a brisk trot through State Street, the main thoroughfare of New Jersey's capital, speedily debouching into the open country along the Delaware River. He had hardly done so, when he caught sight of the magnificent stone building which is the first public institution provided by that State for the care of the insane. Its imposing proportions, with the beautiful grounds in front and the fine prospect, held McCutcheon's admiration for several minutes.

"It would be strange if Ned was in there," he whispered to himself; "it was no fiction of mine in saying that we feared he was a little off his base, for I believe he is. He must be depressed, and, when overtaken by night with no home nor money in his pocket, how can he help realizing the dreadful mistake he has made?"

The young man had listened so heedfully to the account of his new friend, that he recognized the spot where Ned was last seen by him. Since it was well into the afternoon when he disappeared from sight, it was fair to conclude that he had continued walking until dark. Accordingly, he decided to make no inquiry until he advanced considerably farther. McCutcheon took what is known as the "river road,"

which is the highway that follows the banks of the Delaware, and for fifty miles is hardly ever out of sight of it. Between it and the river winds the railway and the canal for about fifty miles. The scenery is beautiful, though the placid bosom of the flowing river is not disturbed by anything larger than an ordinary row-boat, or a raft of timber drifting from its starting-point near the headwaters of the stream. At varying distances the river is spanned by the old-fashioned wooden structures that have been in vogue for half a century and more, while a new iron railway bridge crosses the stream not far from the insane asylum. The first bridge of the old-fashioned kind at which he halted was at Washington's Crossing, being near the spot where the immortal Father of his Country crossed on that tempestuous night in mid-winter on his way to capture the Hessians at Trenton. McCutcheon decided to inquire of the man who collected toll at that point. When asked whether he had noticed a young man something more than a week before, who was on foot and carrying a valise, this individual was thoughtful a minute or two, and then asked several questions in turn, their utterance implying a knowledge of Ned Melton which gave the searcher high hope.

"Yes, I saw him," said the man; "he was such a fine-looking lad that I would have noticed him any-

where. He was well-dressed and polite, but didn't look as if he was in very high spirits."

"Which way did he go?"

"He crossed the bridge into Pennsylvania; I haven't seen him since; what's the matter?" asked the bridge-tender, feeling that where he had given so much information, he was entitled to something in return. "Has he been stealing or killing anybody?"

"Gracious, no! I am afraid that he is not quite right in his mind, and his friends want me to look him up."

"It's too bad," replied the other sympathetically; "and such a fine-looking youngster too! I'll keep a lookout for him if he comes back this way."

McCutcheon thanked his informant, paid his toll, and entered the long, barn-like structure, with its rattling planks, its musty smell, and whose egress seemed to be a mere hole far away at the other end. He was warned that he would be subjected to a fine of ten dollars if he ventured to drive faster than a walk, or was guilty of carrying a lighted pipe or cigar on the bridge.

Meanwhile, Messrs. Shipman & Gumbridge were awaiting news from McCutcheon and Detective Blowitz, both of whom were hunting for the missing lad with all the ability and energy they possessed. Colonel Bainbridge maintained his severe exterior and showed no signs of relenting toward his ward. He and Mr. Gum-

bridge happening to meet on Broadway, the jeweler cordially saluted him. The old soldier returned a stare in which there was not the slightest sign of recognition.

"He cuts me dead," smiled Mr. Gumbridge, as he sauntered along; "he will never forgive Shipman and me for being friends to his nephew. Ah, it's a queer world!"

Gumbridge visited his club that evening, expecting to meet his partner, with whom he was to engage in a rubber of whist. He was due at nine o'clock, but had not shown up a half-hour later. While wondering what could have detained him, a messenger boy arrived with a dispatch for Mr. Gumbridge. Fearing some accident had befallen his old friend, he opened the envelope with a trembling hand. The message was short and to the point: —

"Come to my house at once. I have important news for you."

As may be supposed, Mr. Gumbridge lost no time in calling a cab and driving to the residence of his partner.

"Haven't you heard about Colonel Bainbridge?" was the question of the host, as he met his visitor in the hall.

"No, what is it?"

"He dropped dead not more than an hour ago."

"Is it possible? What were the circumstances?"

"His servant brought me word; he had entered his

home, gone to his library, and was in the act of lighting a cigar, when he fell in a heap on the floor and never spoke. A physician was brought as quickly as possible, but apoplexy had carried him off with unusual suddenness."

"Ah," said Mr. Gumbridge, expressing the thought that was in his partner's mind; "if Ned had only waited a few days, there would have been no occasion for him to leave his home. He may now learn nothing of the sad event for weeks or months."

"Even then, will he return?" asked the other, looking his friend in the face.

"What's to prevent him?"

"I don't know, unless — well, you know, helloa! who's that?" asked the host, as the door-bell tinkled.

To his surprise, the servant entered a moment later bearing a telegram which she handed to him.

"Well, if this doesn't beat everything!" he exclaimed, passing the slip to his friend, who read the following: —

"I have found him; please mention it to no one. J. McC."

"Since McCutcheon has given his address, telegraph him at once about the death of Colonel Bainbridge," suggested Mr. Gumbridge.

It was accordingly so done.

CHAPTER XXV.

The sun was setting on a cool autumn day when Ned Melton arrived at the bridge which spans the Delaware River a few miles above Trenton, at the place known as Washington's Crossing. He had walked at a brisk pace, for he was a natural-born athlete, and despite the depressing circumstances that weighed him down, he enjoyed the exercise in the clear air. He had an eye, too, for beauty, and saw much to admire on that tramp along the river road, though he could not forget the great sorrow of his life. He had left the train at Trenton, as has already been explained, arriving at the Trenton House between midnight and morning. His first intention was to continue to Philadelphia; but he did a good deal of thinking on the night of his flight from home, and it seemed to him that that city was one of the first places where he would be looked for by those that were unwilling to allow him to depart in peace. Besides, his funds were at a frightfully low ebb; and if he paid his fare to the Quaker City, he would not have enough left to buy lodging and breakfast. He had several acquaintances there; but had they been intimate friends, he would not have gone near

them for the world. He must keep away from all who were likely to recognize him. He fixed upon Trenton, because he had never been there, and did not know the name of a person living in the city. Had he dreamed that that was the very place where he was to be identified, as we have shown he was, he would have shunned it as a pestilence. He had not yet decided what to do, and lay for a long time the next morning in bed, revolving the question in his mind. He spent a considerable part of the next day in informing himself of the country surrounding the State capital, but it was not until the afternoon that he decided upon his course. He noticed the young man who showed an interest in him at the hotel, and whom he afterward saw in a carriage. He had no recollection of ever having met him before; but the keen look he fixed upon Ned caused misgiving, and led him to place himself beyond all likelihood of meeting him again.

"He may remember seeing me in the store or somewhere; and if uncle takes any measures to bring me back, he may give him help."

Had Ned possessed the means, he would have boarded the cars and gone still farther away, but that was out of the question. So he boldly struck off on foot, and, as has been said, reached the river bridge just as the autumn day was drawing to a close. After paying his toll, he found he had precisely twenty cents left;

and he would not have had even that, had he not come upon some unexpected change in his pockets the night before.

"I couldn't begin much lower down the ladder," he muttered, as he emerged from the bridge on the other side, "though I believe some of our multi-millionaires started on nothing at all. A couple of dimes will get me something to eat, but what will I do for lodging? Well, I can play the tramp, and sleep at some farmer's house, if his suspicions are not too strong, and he doesn't set his dog on me."

There were only a few houses on the other side of the river, and he concluded to strike off into the open country.

"I have now a whole State between me and New York, and I think they will have hard work to trace me. I wonder whether Shipman & Gumbridge will set Blowitz to work again, or whether McCutcheon will take up the task himself. I am more afraid of him than of the professional," he added, glancing over his shoulder in the gloom as though he expected to see the familiar figure of his friend at his heels.

But the night was advancing, and the question to be settled was what he was to do. He was sure he never felt so hungry before in his life, and he had walked so far that his feet began to feel it. He wanted to rest, and longed, as never before, for a clean warm bed, in

which to cover up and sleep the sleep of the young and healthy, whose frame is wearied and in need of repose. There was no moon; but the stars were shining brightly, and he could see objects fairly well at a distance of a hundred feet or more. Something akin to envy stirred his heart as he glanced across the sloping meadows, and saw the star-like twinklings which told where the happy farmers were gathered around their firesides, or at their tables, after the hard day's toil. Twice he started to turn into the lane; but a feeling of repugnance caused him to refrain, as though he were about to do a dishonorable thing. He had never begged, and he must become more tired and hungry before he could bring himself to it. So he strode forward, beginning to wonder how it would all end. It was a half-hour later, and he was still walking, when he formed his resolution.

"I may as well try it first as last. By and by it will be so late that all these folks will have retired, and then it won't do to wake them up to wait on me."

The wide gate of the lane was open, and he walked, with quickened step, the short distance, anxious to have the matter ended one way or another. He saw before him a farmhouse of the ordinary kind, common in that part of the country among the moderately well-to-do farmers. The yard was entered through a narrow gate, held in place by a weight and chain, which per-

mitted it to be drawn open, after which it swung shut of itself. Then a walk, a few rods in length, led to the side-door of the room, from which a light shone through the windows, the front portion of the building, and, indeed, all the rest of it, being in darkness. This was the living-room of the farmer. In it he and his family ate their meals and spent the evenings, except on the very rare occasions when when they had "company," or some unusual event took place. Ned Melton allowed the gate to swing shut with considerable noise, and waited a moment after doing so. He wanted to give timely notice to any canines in the vicinity, and allow himself a comfortable margin for retreat in the event of any dog's appearance. None showed up, and his heart beat with renewed hope as he walked along the narrow path and approached the door. There was no knocker; and stepping upon the low porch, he struck the door a smart rap. He heard voices inside, and some one said, —

"Hark! I believe some one knocked."

"No, they didn't," replied another, who preferred to wait rather than rise and find out.

Ned settled it by repeating the summons, doing so with such sharpness that there could be no mistake.

"What did I tell you?" demanded the first speaker; "go to the door, 'Lige, you lazy bumpkin."

A heavy, shuffling step was heard, and the next

moment the door was opened, and a bronzed, stoop-shouldered man stood before Ned, with an equally tall, vinegar-faced woman just behind him, and a yellow-haired, freckled girl in the background.

"Good-evening," said Ned, lifting his hat; "would you be kind enough"—

"What do you want?" demanded the woman, who was evidently the man of the house.

Inasmuch as Ned was in the act of making known his wishes, it occurred to him that this question was superfluous, but it was no time to stand upon niceties.

"I am very hungry and tired," he answered, "and if you will be kind enough to allow me to come in and rest"—

"We hain't got nothin' for tramps," called the woman shrilly; "this hain't a hotel."

The man had not yet opened his mouth. He was about to speak, when his wife called, —

"'Lige, why don't you shet the door? Hain't you got anything better to do than to be gabbing with tramps? I tell you, shet the door!"

"Yes'm," said the husband, meekly obeying, before Ned, even had he been disposed, could add another word.

CHAPTER XXVI.

As Ned Melton opened the gate to pass out, something cold touched his hand. Looking down he saw an immense dog walking at his side. He was startled; but, as the brute showed no hostility, he patted his head. The dog whined and wagged his tail, standing still and gazing after him, as though sorry he couldn't bear him company in his wanderings. The dog was wiser than his master and mistress, for he recognized the difference between a gentleman and a tramp. The boy's proud spirit revolted at the contumely with which he had been treated. He had been insulted and driven from the door by a couple of ill-tempered people, as though he were but an ordinary beggar.

"And that's about what I am," he reflected, as he reached the public highway and walked briskly toward some unknown point; "but I wonder whether it would have made any difference if I had offered them my twenty cents for supper. A dime looks mighty big to that kind of folks — helloa!"

He noticed that the clear starlight which had served him so well was fading out. The sky was becoming overcast, as though a storm impended. It would be bad

for him if caught in the rain, and he glanced around with considerable misgiving. In the gloom ahead the forms of two men took shape. He felt some reluctance to meet strangers; but believing they must have seen him, he put a bold face on the matter and walked on, as though about to greet a couple of acquaintances. He supposed the men were coming toward him; but, to his surprise, he had gone but a short way, when he discovered that they were standing still, as if awaiting his approach. A nearer view showed him that they belonged to the class he abominated. They were a couple of tramps that had discovered him before he had observed them. Had Ned seen them a minute sooner he would have avoided them; but it was too late now, and he could only do as he had intended from the first, — put on a bold front and not let them think he was afraid. They were a couple of the worst specimens he had ever seen, — ragged, frowzy, unclean, sulking, and ill-favored. Both were below the medium size, though their rough out-door life must have given them a great deal of strength and vigor.

"How'r' you, pard?" one of them asked in a husky voice, as Ned approached, swerving enough to the left to avoid too close contact.

"Good-evening, sir," replied the youth, with all the dignity he could assume.

"Which way are ye goin'?" asked the other.

"If you have eyes you can see which way I am traveling without troubling me with the question."

"Don't be quite so peart, younker; do you know who we are?"

"No, and what's more, I don't care; I have no interest in you."

Instead of accepting this repulse, the fellows struck into the same brisk pace as the youth, and placed themselves beside him, though they were walking in the middle of the road, while Ned followed the footpath. He kept a sharp eye on them, for he was convinced they meant him ill. Having no weapon, the youth, strong, active, and skillful as he was, might well shrink from an encounter with two such men. His chief consolation was that he knew he could outrun them if flight became necessary, and it looked as if that was to be the outcome of the business. At the same time, it must not be supposed that he was not ready to defend himself if driven to it. If either of those frowzy scamps laid hands on him, he was likely to find he had made a serious mistake.

"Do you think it's goin' to rain?" asked the first speaker, who evidently was trying to win his confidence.

"I haven't thought much about it," was the reply.

"How far are you goin'?"

"I don't see that that is any concern of yours; I suppose you are on your way to the nearest henroost."

"You seem to have doubts about our bein' gentlemen," remarked the shorter of the couple in a grieved voice.

"No; I haven't any doubts at all."

"Thanks; my friend here is Honorable Mr. Spinks, a member of the last Legislatur' of Pennsylvany; and I'm Reverend Horatio Fitzjames of Manayunk, traveling for my health. We find it does us more good to take a jaunt like this than to ride in the stuffy private cars."

Ned could not help smiling at the conceit that prompted these words. There was enough starlight remaining for him to see their countenances quite plainly. Both were covered with stubby beard, and were as repulsive as they could well be. One wore a soft hat, the band of which had been gone so long that the shape was that of a cone. A portion of the top was missing, and the spiky hair showed through. The head-gear of the other was a straw hat, probably stolen from some scarecrow. The crown was fastened by only a few threads at the rear, and the front lifted and fell as he walked like the opening and shutting of an immense clam. If ventilation is good for the head, those fellows were fortunate in that respect.

"I had a suspicion," said Ned, humoring the whim of the fellows, but not forgetting to keep his eye on them, "that you were a couple of capitalists bound for Canada; you are facing that way."

"True, we have an abundance of funds with us. Fact is, that this slight limp that you have noticed maybe in my pard was caused by the weight of the boodle he has had to carry for the last few days; he is used to that sort of thing, but the last stock speckylation that we went into fetched us more funds than we expected, and we didn't want to trust the banks. I say now, younker, mebbe you've got somethin' of the same kind in that hand-bag of yourn?"

As the tramp uttered these ominous words, he approached a step nearer to Ned, who slackened his pace so as to keep abreast of the two, and thus prevent them from getting behind him.

"I wish it was," he replied with a laugh; "for then I wouldn't be tramping along the highway at this time of night."

"But you've got somethin' in there," persisted the rogue.

"I don't think I would be carrying an empty valise across the country for the fun of the thing. Yes; it is pretty well filled with clothing, toilet articles, and knick-knacks."

"S'pose you let us look at them. Mr. Spinks and me has been in want of somethin' like that for the past few days. We're on our way to Trenton, to call on the gov'nor by app'intment, and we want to brush our hair and use scented soap, so as to make a good impression."

"See here," said Ned, turning squarely towards them; "you may as well understand that you can't play any game on me; I've seen the likes of you before and am always ready for you."

He laid his hand threateningly at his hip, as though about to draw his revolver, though, as the reader knows, he had no weapon of any kind in his possession. As he spoke, he came to a halt and the two did the same, surprised by the sudden aggressiveness of the youth.

"Gracious! you wouldn't shoot a couple of gentlemen for axing you a simple question, would you?" inquired the larger one, as though his feelings were deeply wounded.

"I would do the community a good turn if I shot both of you; you are a couple of thieves who ought to be compelled to work in the penitentiary, and if I could have my way you would."

While Ned Melton was delivering this indignant opinion, the shorter of the couple was gradually edging round so as to get behind him. Leaving his companion to do the talking, he prepared for the work they had in mind. Suddenly he bounded forward like a cat, intending to fling his arm about the neck of the youth and bear him to the ground. But that same youth had an eye on him.

He let fly with all his force.

CHAPTER XXVII.

An instant before the tramp's arm passed around the neck of Ned Melton, his head came in contact with something. The youth read his purpose in the first stealthy move he made, and let fly with all the force he could throw into his right arm. The blow of a catapult could hardly have been more effective, for the wretch went over on his back as if smitten by a thunderbolt. Without waiting for him to rise, or to see what his companion did, Ned whirled about and sped down the road like a deer. If the tramp started in pursuit he must have quickly given it up, for when the fugitive looked around nothing was seen of him.

"They will be along after a while," he concluded; "and they don't bear me any good-will for that blow. I'm glad I haven't any pistol with me; for if I had, I would have shot that scamp, and I never would cease to regret killing a person, even though done in self-defense."

He resumed his walk at a brisk pace, continually glancing back to make sure they did not steal upon him again. A fourth of a mile from the scene of the encounter, he came to where the roads forked. He

paused a moment, debating which branch to take. Both appeared to be equally traveled, and it made no difference which he followed. What he wanted to do was to follow the one the tramps would avoid, for he dreaded another meeting with them. But there was no way of deciding the question, and he had to do it by guess. He turned to the right, trusting to good fortune, and with no more knowledge of where it would lead him than if he were in the heart of Africa. At the side of the highway, a large house surrounded by fine and well laid-out grounds loomed in view, and a light shining from the front room showed that the occupants had not yet retired.

"I can't have any worse luck here than at the other place," mused Ned, slacking his pace, and laying his hand on the gate as he reached it. "I will ask, and if they refuse me — well, I'll then decide what to do."

The latch of the gate made a clicking sound as he raised it; and immediately a threatening growl followed, and with a short bark a huge dog came galloping down from the front porch to meet him.

"I don't care about making your acquaintance," said the youth, instantly stepping back and closing the gate.

The brute, having driven the intruder off, was satisfied to let him go in peace. He stood just within the yard, as if to be ready for him in case he changed his mind, which, it need hardly be said, Ned did not do.

He had not yet passed beyond sight of the building when a drop of water fell on his hand. Looking up he observed a bank of dark clouds climbing toward the zenith. A heavy rain was sure to fall in a short time, and unless he found shelter speedily he must be drenched to the skin. He did not dare to turn back, and naturally fixed his attention on the large and well-made barn and outbuildings standing but a short distance from the house.

"If I can get in there it will answer for to-night, and that's all I have to think about at present."

He was more fortunate than he anticipated. The main door was locked; but a smaller one near the end of the barn seemed to have been overlooked by the owner, and readily opened. At the moment he stepped within, the rain began falling fast, and he was just in time to save himself from a disagreeable wetting. It was as dark as Egypt; and he stood for some minutes asking himself what was the right thing to do, now that he had found temporary refuge and shelter. A horse whinnied in a stall on the left, and the interior was redolent with the odor of grain. Drawing a small rubber safe from his pocket, he struck a match and held it above his head. The tiny flame showed him several stalls on his left, in which were three horses who looked wonderingly at him. In his front, and against the opposite side of the barn, stood a huge chest, in which the

farmer doubtless kept his ground feed for his horses, while on his right the hay was piled to the height of twenty feet, reaching two-thirds of the way to the roof. At the farther end of what may be called the hallway, a ladder stood almost upright against the hay, being used doubtless by the farmer or his men in reaching the top to fling down the fodder for the horses. Having fixed all this in his mind, Ned dropped the match, and ground it under his heel to avert all danger of fire. Then he felt his way to the foot of the ladder, up which he carefully climbed to the top of the hay. There he struck another match and surveyed his surroundings. The surface of the mow was comparatively level; and having carefully extinguished the second match, he stepped off, tramped over the yielding stuff to the farther corner, where he flung his weary frame, thankful that rest had come at last. Before closing his eyes in sleep, he spent several minutes in prayer, as was his invariable custom. The patter of the rain on the roof could not have sounded more dismal; and hungry and tired as he was, the situation was enough to depress his spirits beyond expression. But, contrasting his present quarters with those of the early part of the preceding night in his luxurious home in New York, he compressed his lips and muttered, —

"I wouldn't exchange them; I must expect this at first; but a young fellow like me can't starve to death,

and I am strong and willing, so that I shall find something to do to-morrow. I wish I had money to carry me farther away; but I am as safe here, and probably safer, than if in Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, or any of the large cities. Almost any man, except my uncle, would see the injustice he has done me; but he never will, and I will stay away from him until I become my own master."

He adjusted himself as comfortably as he could, placing his valise so that it served as a pillow, and had not lain long when drowsiness began stealing over him. There is something soothing in the fall of rain on the shingles despite its dismal monotone, and it wooed him to slumber ere he was aware. The fall gradually decreased as the hours advanced, until it stopped altogether. There was no wind, and the shower was of the ordinary kind which is common at that season of the year. Ned had glanced at his watch by the light of one of his matches, and saw that it was about half-past ten when he entered the barn. Ten minutes after lying down he became unconscious, and doubtless would not have opened his eyes until daylight, had he not been disturbed by voices. Recalling where he was, he raised his head and listened. His first thought was that it was near morning, and that the farmer and one of his men had come to the barn to begin work; but he was quickly undeceived.

"This is the place where we stayed night afore last," remarked one in a familiar, husky voice; "we got our bearin's then, so it ain't any use, Bill, to strike a match."

"We'll have to light out afore sunup; for that chap has a big dog, and don't love gentlemen like us."

"All right, here's the ladder — confound it!"

"What's the matter?" asked his companion.

"I hit my nose agin the side, just on the spot where that young tiger banged me. Ginger! how it hurts!"

"He did drop you bootiful, Bill; I never seed a purtier blow; that young feller orter train as a prize-fighter; it's a pity he should waste his time in going to school. Are you all right?"

"As right as I kin be with my nose swellin' about three inches a minute. I'm on the ladder now, and we'll take the same quarters as we had afore; come on!"

And the two tramps began climbing the support that led to Ned Melton's sleeping apartment.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

As may be supposed, Ned Melton from his perch at the top of the haymow listened to the conversation of the tramps below, with his interest at the highest point. He hoped at first that they would stay where they were, and had he thought he would have drawn up the ladder to prevent their following him; but, before he was aware, one of them began climbing the rounds with the other closely behind. It was necessary to think and act quickly. It was natural to suppose that the tramps would feel their way to a point removed from the front of the mow, and probably close to where the youth was lying. He therefore rose silently, while they were yet on the support, and placed himself at one side and closer to the front, holding himself ready to change again if they came nigh to him. It was fortunate that the interior was utterly dark. A small open window at one end, near the roof, admitted no light; for there was none to admit from the outside, and it was too high to be used as a means of escape. If the tramps should strike a match and discover the lad there, he would be at great disadvantage. Unable to use his dexterity, he could not hope to combat them successfully. At the

same time, he was reluctant to leave his comparatively comfortable quarters and go out in the night again.

"Here we are!" muttered the leader of the vagrants, as he stepped from the ladder upon the hay; "and it sorter seems familiar; rather chilly, but it beats sleepin' out-of-doors."

"Hadn't you better strike a light, Sam, so as to make sure of our bearin's?"

"What's the use? We're all right."

"But I'd like to have a smoke."

"It's too late for that, and you know that barn we burned last week from your infarnal smokin'; but go ahead if you want to."

"I can't sleep without my reg'lar luxury."

Then listening, Ned heard the fellow in the stillness, now that the rain had ceased falling, fumbling in his ragged garments for a match. The youth softly felt his way to the ladder, and put his hand on it, ready to descend the moment the light flashed out in the gloom. He was confident he could get down in time to elude them, and did not want to do so until obliged to leave. The tramp found the match after a time, and drew it against a support at his side. Ned saw the yellow streak that followed the friction, though the wee bit of pine did not break into flame. He struck it again and again, but it failed, and finally ceased to give the slightest illumination. With a growl he produced a second

and third, with the same failure in each instance. Their clothing had become so wet during the recent rain that the matches were useless for the time.

"I b'lieve I'll have to give it up," said the disappointed vagabond, with an impatient expression; "which bein' so, I never wanted to smoke so bad in all my life."

"It'll taste all the better in the morning; lay down like a vartuous man and snooze while you've got the chance."

The advice was followed perforce. The couple groped about for a few minutes; but they were accustomed to such things, and counted themselves fortunate in securing the refuge.

"See here, old pard," called one of them a few minutes later, "there's somethin' I want you to remember."

"What's that?"

"If you get to dreamin' and kickin' about in your sleep, you mustn't land that big foot of yourn on my nose; it seems as though everything that hits me does it agin that, and it's gettin' sort of monoternous, see?"

"I can't see nothin' in this place; but if you'll keep your nose out of the way of my heel, I'll let it alone."

"You'd better," muttered the other.

Now that the fellows were disposed of for the time, Ned Melton concluded that he might as well stay where he was until daylight. He had no idea of the hour,

but believed the night was nearly over. He would keep awake until morning, and then slip down and out of the barn without arousing them. Accordingly, with the utmost care, he adjusted his position so that he sat on the hay with his back against the clapboards, to wait the short time, as he believed, that remained of the night. What an absurd mistake! He had not sat long when the heavy breathing of the others showed that they were unconscious. With never a thought that he would soon be the same, Ned held his seat, and at the end of ten minutes was sunk as deep in slumber as they. This time he didn't open his eyes until the sun was above the horizon. Not only that, but the tramps awoke before him. Their feeling, perhaps, may be imagined when the one with the damaged nasal organ sat up and saw the youth that had caused it all sitting only a few feet away, sound asleep.

The tramp touched his companion, and, in response to his inquiring look, pointed to Ned.

"Don't that beat the bugs?" he whispered. "Talkin' 'bout special providences, isn't that a bang-up one?"

The other rose to a sitting posture, rubbed his eyes, and stared as though, for the moment, he could not understand what it all meant.

"When do you s'pose he arrove?"

"Blessed if I know! After we was asleep, I reckon, or he wouldn't have stayed here; but wouldn't I like to

spile that putty face of his for the rap he give me! How does my nose look this morning, Sam?"

"Like a full-grown cabbage," replied the other with a chuckle; "how does it feel?"

"As big as a meetin'-house. I'm goin' to square accounts with him afore he leaves this place; my good looks is too sacred for any one to trifle with. I'll give him the biggest maullin' he ever had, and he won't forget it as long as he lives."

"Be a little careful how you go at him, for you can tell by his build that he's a tough one."

"Ain't you goin' to help me?" demanded the owner of the wounded nose, speaking incautiously loud in his excitement.

"If you want me to, of course I'll help, but I s'posed you were able to handle him alone."

"So I could if it wasn't for my nose; but he would be mean enough to give me another bang on it: I couldn't stand that."

"All right; but afore we begin the punchin' bus'ness, let's take a look at that valise of his. Who knows but what it's full of silver spoons, gold watches, and diamonds."

The suggestion struck the other favorably, and the one who proposed it began creeping carefully toward the sleeping youth. He reached his side without arousing him. One of Ned's hands was resting on the

valise, but the tramp withdrew it so softly that the fingers sank down on the hay without awakening the lad.

The rascals grinned with delight as they moved back a few feet; and, sitting on the hay, one of them took the valise in his hands.

"Keep an eye onto him," he whispered to the other, who was greedily watching his movements; "mebbe he's playin' 'possum, and will light onto us like a full-grown cyclone."

"Don't you fear; I'll fall onto him afore he can get both peepers open. Sh! no noise!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE fact that neither had the key to Ned Melton's valise made little difference. The fellow holding it drew a stumpy knife from his pocket, and opened one of the blades with his teeth. Then he deftly inserted the point in the lock, and worked it about for a moment, when the fastening yielded.

"It's a bonanzer!" exclaimed the other, leaning over; "aren't we in luck?"

His words were uttered in such a loud voice that they awoke Ned. One look on his part told the exasperating story, — while he slept the spoilers had made themselves masters of the situation. The sight of the tramps, one with the valise on his knees, and with both about to rob him of everything it contained, so angered him that for a moment he forgot his caution. He came to his feet with a bound and the exclamation: —

"You thieves! I'll teach you better than that!"

Insomuch as the vagrants meant to assail him when he awoke, they were not quite prepared for the furious assault he made on them. The one with the valise on his knees saw the youth leap toward him, as if fired from a catapult; and, before he rightly understood what

it all meant, Ned let drive with his fist. The blow was fully as powerful as that of the night before; and, what was equally to the purpose, it landed precisely on the same spot, namely, the nose.

With a howl of pain and wrath, the burly miscreant toppled over on his back. He was utterly discomfited for the moment, and could only roar to his companion, —

"Kill him, Sam! Why don't you kill him, Sam? Quick, before he gets away!"

It was not to be supposed that the second rascal would remain idle now that hostilities had commenced. In fact, he was taken as completely off his guard as the other, or he would have interposed to save his friend, who seemed to be trying to kick the rafters from the roof. Before he could rise, Ned gave his valise such a kick that it went spinning across the top of the mow and fell to the floor below, where the foot of the ladder rested. Only a few of the contents were scattered, and they had enough of the momentum to follow the valise, so that all of Ned's personal property was removed from the immediate jurisdiction of the tramps; they could not secure it without descending the ladder. It now remained for Ned to follow his property; but that was not such an easy matter. It was no great leap from the top of the mow to the floor; but he was afraid the angry tramp would drop on his shoulders before he

could clear himself. He could seize the top of the ladder, but the fellow was sure to catch him before he could get out of the way. The second rogue would soon be on his feet, and it was idle for Ned to hope he could hold his own against the two while in such close quarters, and handicapped by the yielding hay. His efforts from the moment he struck the tramp were to escape. He was aware that, if once caught by either, he would receive an unmerciful beating. When, therefore, the second made a lunge at him, he dodged him with great nimbleness, without attempting to strike back. The fellow just missed him, and followed up his attack with such quickness that before the youth could fully recover his feet became entangled in the hay. He exerted himself desperately to bound to one side; but he fell, and his assailant came down on him like a falling mountain.

By this time, too, the other had recovered himself; and, with one hand pressing his swollen nose, he roared: —

"Hold him fast, Sam!"

"I will," replied the other, who had placed his ugly figure astride of Ned, who struggled with fury, knowing that the moment he yielded the wretches would show him no mercy, while so long as he resisted they were not likely to do him much harm. As it was, he turned himself and twisted about with such desperation

that the man on his breast was nearly thrown off, and had to give his whole attention to averting the threatened capsize. Meanwhile the other tramp advanced toward the two combatants with the idea of catching hold of Ned's legs, which were flying around like a windmill, and so assist his comrade to subdue the lad into subjugation. Nothing was truer than the remark made the night before, to the effect that while he was suffering from an injured nose, every blow which he received alighted on that organ. He had just received a tremendous one; and now, when confident of grasping Ned and holding him secure, one of those flying feet landed on that much-abused spot with such unexpected force that it may be said to have finished him. The combatants were close to the edge of the mow, and all were in danger of going over. In fact, one of them did, being unable to save himself from the result of that terrific kick. He instinctively threw out his hands, but there was nothing to grasp, and over he went. His neck would probably have been broken but for an extraordinary event. An instant before the owner of the barn had entered, and was in time to receive the descending tramp on his shoulders. The shock was startling, though the farmer was only shaken up.

"What the mischief does this mean?" he demanded, catching the terrified tramp by the throat, as he began

clambering to his feet; "what are you doing here? Is that your style of getting up in the morning? Helloa! something is going on up on the mow! Fred, take care of this fellow, while I find out what they have been doing."

The Fred referred to was the farmer's son, a young man of twenty, fully as tall and powerful as his parent. He showed his opinion of the situation by hurling the tramp through the open door, and delivering a kick the instant they were on the outside, which seemed to lift him fully a foot from the ground. As the fellow alighted, he received another tremendous visitation of the same nature, and was then left alone.

"I guess that'll do for a starter!" observed the young man, pausing with his hands on his hips and viewing his work.

The banged-up vagrant never looked around; but as soon as he could pull himself together, started on a dead run for the fence that separated the barnyard from the highway. He was so fearful of another "starter," that he had made a prodigious effort to leap the fence, and would have cleared it but for one thing. That was the top rail, which caught in his shoes, and sent him sprawling head-foremost into the highway.

"Considered strictly as a jumper," remarked the unmoved Fred, who held all tramps in utter detestation, "you can't be considered a success."

The fellow did not seem much hurt by his fall; for he was almost instantly on his feet, and sped down the road like a whirlwind. At this moment Bowser, the huge dog that had frightened Ned Melton from the front of the house the night before, came trotting upon the scene. Observing a man running, an irresistible impulse seized him to take part in the proceedings. He identified the individual at once as one of those nuisances for whose abatement he existed, and started for him with all the vim of his nature. Fred, however, concluded that the rogue had been punished sufficiently, and called to the dog in such peremptory tones, that he gave up the pursuit just as he was about to use his teeth, and came sullenly toward his master, doubtless feeling that he had been shamefully robbed of an enjoyment that rightfully was his own.

"I wonder what's the circus inside," mused Fred, who heard loud voices from within; "come, Bowser, let's see what's up; I shouldn't wonder if there's something there for you. Don't pout now, for you know I always treat you well."

And leaning over, he patted the huge brute for a minute or two, until he was restored to his native good-humor. That done, he followed his parent through the door into the barn, where he found that particularly lively times were prevailing, with a promise of something for him and Bowser to do.

CHAPTER XXX.

MEANWHILE, as may be supposed, Ned Melton's attention was fully occupied with the second tramp on top of the haymow. He heard the voices below, and suspected who it was that had arrived on the scene, but he had no chance just then to inform himself. He was striving to keep his savage assailant from beating him. The tramp grew angrier every minute. The youth was too proud to call for help, even though he had reason to believe it was at hand; and the fellow, exasperated at his failure to hold the struggling lad fast, suddenly struck him a cruel blow in the face. Ned kept one arm bent across his eyes to save them, but the blow on the cheek sent a thrill of agony through his frame.

"I'll kill you!" muttered the man between his closed teeth, raising his fist to strike again. Ned caught the wrist of the descending hand, and held it with a grip of iron. In the fierce effort to free himself the man fell partly on one side, but retained his mastery of the boy, and was savage enough to carry out the frightful threat he had just made. By a desperate, despairing exertion, Ned drew his knees from under the fellow's body and close to his own face. This brought his foot in front of

the countenance of the panting vagrant, and he shot it out like the plunge of a piston rod. The impact did not harm the wretch, but it sent him several feet away and over the edge of the mow.

Instead of going over head first like his companion, he landed on his feet directly between Farmer Calkins and his son.

"Here's another of you!" roared the former, seizing him by the throat, "give an account of yourself!"

"My son up there was trying to set fire to your barn, and I was atakin' him in hand when he kicked me off the mow," was the astounding reply of the tramp, who certainly possessed presence of mind under trying circumstances.

"He did, eh?" thundered the aroused farmer. "I'll attend to him; wait till I go up and fetch him down."

"He's broke my heart," added the tramp, sniffing as though his feelings were really wounded. "I can't bear to look onto his face agin and will leave him with you."

Mr. Calkins started up the ladder so vigorously that it tipped back with him, and he narrowly escaped falling; but righting it, he resumed his ascent with more care.

"I'll leave him with you; don't be too hard onto him," whined the tramp, moving toward the door.

"Hold on," interposed the son Fred, barring his exit; "wait till we look into this; you don't resemble

an innocent orphan, and we'll hear what your son has to say."

"I've suffered enough from his ingratertude," added the tramp, attempting again to pass through the door. "It will kill me to look onto him agin."

"Whether it will kill you or not, you'll stay here till we get at the bottom of this business," said the young man, placing himself in the door so as to hold the other where he was.

"Jes' as you say; but it's too bad to break the heart of a father whose feelings has been lacerated terrible."

Farmer Calkins was in a tempestuous state of mind when he arrived at the top of the ladder and stepped upon his own haymow. Crediting the declaration of the tramp, he was ready to visit severe chastisement on the young scrapegrace that had meant to burn his property. Ned, having freed himself of his incubus, rose to his feet and began adjusting his clothing, which had been badly disarranged by his furious struggle with his assailant. His collar was torn, his necktie awry, his trousers shoved up the legs, his hat had fallen off and been crushed, and his cheek smarted from the blow of the miscreant that was eager to do him serious injury. He climbed to his feet, and had righted matters as far as he could, when the head of the indignant farmer rose to view, and he stepped toward him with the demand, —

"What does all this mean, sir?"

Even as he uttered the question, there came a feeling of doubt. He expected to see a ragged vagabond of a big boy, with a face as repulsive as that of the man who claimed to be his parent. Instead, he observed a well-dressed youth, with an unusually fine countenance and the indescribable air of a gentleman.

"Those tramps attacked me," replied Ned, "and I was defending myself as best I could."

"Are you his son?"

Young Melton, who had heard the remark of the scamp, was prepared for this question; and despite the pain in his face, he laughed heartily, as he asked in return, —

"Do I look like the son of such a fellow?"

"I'll be hanged if you do; but he says you are, and that you were going to set fire to my barn, and he was trying to stop you."

Ned saw the advantage he held, and with another pleasant smile he inquired, —

"Do you believe I would injure the property of any one?"

"I don't know about that," replied the farmer doubtfully; "you can't always tell what a chap is by his looks; what were you doing in the company of those tramps?"

"I have no home; I came in here to sleep" —

"Why didn't you come to the house?" interrupted

the farmer, who was becoming prepossessed in favor of the lad introduced to him under such peculiar circumstances.

"I started to do so, but your dog frightened me off; I came in here and lay down on the hay; when I awoke this morning, I saw those two tramps opening my valise. They attacked me on the road last night and I fought them off, but they caught me foul here; you can see the mark on my face where one of them struck me" —

"Which one hit you?" asked the farmer, his face growing black with anger.

"The one down below that I just kicked off of me."

Without a word, the farmer turned to the ladder and started down with such vigor that it tipped again as it stood nearly perpendicular, and he alighted on his feet with as much emphasis as the tramp that had just preceded him.

"Fred," he said to his son, "that's the biggest rascal you have there out of State prison; nail him" —

"I heard your conversation on the mow," remarked the son, in whose eyes shone a wrathful gleam; "tell the fellow to come down and see the circus."

Ned Melton grasped the situation too well to wait for the invitation. Fred gave him one glance, and turned to the tramp with the utmost scorn.

"You call that young man your son, do you? He's no more like you than day is like night" —

By this time the vagrant comprehended that the only wise thing for him to do was to make a break for liberty. The relations between him and the others were becoming more strained every second. The son in his excitement advanced to lay hands on him, when he dived through the door, cleverly dodging the hand that shot out to stop him. He did not escape the irresistible foot, however, which was landed with more force than in the former instance. At this moment, too, Bowser concluded that he was entitled to some consideration for the imposition put upon him a brief while before. He emitted one growl, and then went for the fleeing wretch like a meteor. What is more, he arrived, and kept nipping at the heels of the fellow, who tore down the road yelling with terror, for several hundred yards, before he considered the account squared and trotted back to his masters, confident of their approval for the thorough style in which he had acquitted himself.

"Now, young man, we'll hear from you," remarked the farmer in a not unkindly voice; "what have you to say? Gracious me! he is dying, Fred!" added the terrified man.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Ned Melton, it will be remembered, had not eaten a mouthful since the preceding noon. He was faint with hunger when he dropped asleep, to be finally awakened in the startling manner already described. The night was chilly, and it was the first time in his life that he had not slept in a comfortable bed. He was benumbed with cold, when he became involved in a terrific struggle with the two tramps. Descending to the lower floor, he proceeded to gather up the articles that were scattered by his kick of his valise. Restoring them to their place, and locking up the receptacle, he faced the farmer and his son, at the moment the former called on him for an explanation of his presence in the barn under such curious circumstances. It was at that moment the reaction came. Things swam before his eyes, he grew deathly pale, staggered, and would have fallen, had not Fred Calkins sprung forward and caught him in his arms.

"He's fainted, father; bring some water."

"I'll be all right in a minute," said Ned weakly; but the farmer had dashed to the pump in the barn-yard, and catching up some water from the trough, in the hollow

of his hand, he flung it in the boy's face, at the moment Fred carefully led him to a seat on the floor, with his head leaning against the hay. He speedily revived, and with indescribable winsomeness of manner, that went straight to the heart of the farmer and his son, said, —

"I beg pardon for my weakness; I never fainted before, but I have had nothing to eat since noon yesterday."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed the horrified husbandman, "was there ever anything like it? Let's get him to the house at once; lend a hand, Fred."

"I can walk alone, thank you," said Ned, bravely struggling to his feet, and reaching for his valise which the son had picked up from the floor.

"I'll carry it, and you had better lean on me."

Ned did as requested, and, walking slowly, they entered the kitchen, where the odor of fragrant coffee and cooking food brought back his ravening hunger. "Aunt Eliza," as the goodwife was called by her husband, was quickly made aware of the situation, and her good soul instantly overflowed with sympathy. What suffering the youth would have been saved but for the well-meaning Bowser the night before! The family had eaten their morning meal before the visit to the barn; but there was an abundance of food left, and if Ned Melton lives to see a century of years, he will never sit down to a feast as enjoyable as that which he ate at the house

of Farmer Calkins on the second morning after leaving home. He had fallen into the hands of good Samaritans, who believed in him. His pleasing manner and appearance had won their hearts; and when they understood the gallant manner in which this youth, hardly grown to man's estate, had beaten off two vicious tramps, the three, and especially Fred, the son, did not try to repress their admiration. Had they known of that exploit of Ned at the seashore some weeks before, there's no saying what they would have done. But they were quite sure never to hear of it from the hero himself.

Ned knew that the questions would soon begin. If any one had the right to information concerning him, they had earned it by their kindness, and he was ready to go as far as was safe in imparting all the knowledge he dared.

"Where are you from?" asked the farmer, when the meal was finished and the conversation had continued some minutes.

"New York City."

"What's your name?"

Ned had registered at the Trenton House under an assumed name; but the deception involved in the act did not impress him as wrong, for he knew the custom was common; but now, when the direct question was put to him, he could not bring himself to tell a falsehood. He, therefore, answered without hesitation,—

"Edmund Melton; both of my parents are dead, and I have set out to seek my fortune; all the money I have is twenty cents, and I am looking for something to do; I know nothing about a farmer's life, but if you will let me work for you I will do my best, and be satisfied with my food and lodging till you think I am worth something more."

There was a good deal in those sentences, and the members of the family stared at the handsome youth as though trying to understand all he had told them. Aunt Eliza beamed smilingly upon him through her spectacles and said, —

"Those white hands of yours don't look as if they could stand this kind of work."

"They will soon become hard and tough," replied Ned, looking down at them, as though the peculiarity named had never struck him before.

"You are welcome to stay here just as long as you choose," said the head of the family, "and we wouldn't take a cent of pay if you was worth a million; any boy of your size that can get the best of two tramps as you did ought to be taken to the fair at Doylestown and showed off as a curiosity."

"I couldn't accept your hospitality on those terms," said Ned gratefully; "but I will be only too glad to work for my living."

"Do you expect to play farmer in those clothes?" asked Fred with a laugh.

"I hardly suppose they will do, but they may answer for a while."

"Fred isn't so much bigger than you," remarked the mother, looking admiringly at the boy; "and I think I could fix up one of his suits so it would answer."

"Look at his shoulders and arms and legs and chest," said Fred, who knew how to appreciate the build of an athlete; "I believe all of them are bigger than mine, but I'm the taller."

"S'pose you stand up and see," suggested the mother.

Ned sprang to his feet, and he and the farmer's son placed themselves back to back. The latter was over six feet in height, so that he overtopped Ned by several inches.

"I'm all ready as soon as the suit is," said young Melton, resuming his seat, in high spirits over his good fortune.

"It will take some time to get them ready," replied Aunt Eliza, "but I'll try to do so to-day and you can begin work to-morrow; what's the matter with your face?" she asked abruptly, arising and walking over to where he sat and bending her kindly eyes upon him.

"That's where one of the tramps struck me," replied Ned, passing his hand over his swollen cheek; "I was fortunate that he didn't injure me more."

"The brute!" exclaimed the indignant housewife. "Frederick, why didn't you punish him for treating Edmund that way?"

"Mother," said the son, reproachfully thrusting out his right foot; "do you observe how the sole of that boot has been loosened? Don't Bowser's jaws look a little tired? Well, the loafer that hit Ned there can explain what caused all that."

"I am proud to say that Fred did his duty," commented the father, adding, "he generally does."

"That must be attended to," remarked the wife, bustling to the cupboard from which she brought a bottle of liniment and a soft rag. Ned protested that the hurt would soon be all right; but she insisted, and carefully rubbed the lotion over the swollen portion, the boy uttering his thanks as the deft hand passed gently and soothingly over his battered countenance, as it had pressed more than one fevered brow when death and life were struggling for the mastery. Work was awaiting the father and the son, as it always was; but they found the company and conversation of the youth so entertaining that they lingered long after the sun was well on its way to meridian. At last, however, they left the house to attend to their duties, insisting that he should rest for the day and wait until Aunt Eliza fixed up the suit of Fred, before their visitor should begin his career in the art of husbandry.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"WHO'S that?"

Farmer Calkins and his son Fred were busy cutting corn and gathering it in "shocks," when Fred stopped for an instant, and, looking in the direction of the house, saw a young man coming toward them, dressed in a homely suit that did not fit him very well, and the trousers of which were rolled up at the bottom because of their superfluous length.

"How will I do?" asked Ned, observing their smiling faces.

"You were cut out for a farmer," replied the elder, "but you had better wait till to-morrow."

"I can't begin any younger," remarked the lad; "give me something to do and show me how to do it."

The farmer handed him the long knife with a wooden handle, and curved at the lower end, which he used in severing the stalks near the ground. "Notice how Fred manages it."

Holding the implement ready for service, Ned looked at his tutor, who swung his left arm about the yellow stalks, gathering them in a close cluster with the hand, and then, with a swinging blow, clipped them off at

the bottom, as neatly as a guillotine could have done it.

"That don't look hard," observed Ned, advancing to one of the hills and trying the operation, which it cannot be said called for a very high display of art. It required three blows, however, before he completed the task.

"You'll get along first-rate," commented Mr. Calkins; "you take hold like an old hand."

"What shall I do with them?" asked the youth, holding the stalks helplessly in his hand and looking round for further directions.

"Pile them up there," replied the farmer, pointing to a mass of stalks near by, which resembled an Indian tepee, or rather would resemble one when clasped near the top by a brand of straw, like the scores of others placed in regular rows in the field.

"Twist some of that straw, and tie it around the top like the rest," added the farmer.

Ned lugged his possessions a few paces, set them up against the others, and then, gathering a handful or two of straw, essayed to turn it into a short rope. He made such a sorry display that the spectators broke into laughter. When the twist was all right at one end, it unwound at the other. Affecting an intensely serious face, Ned kept at it, and finally threw his arms around the top of the shock, as though it were a long lost

brother, and tried to inclose it with the rope of straw. The ends met; but, while he was trying to double them into a sort of knot, the whole thing untwisted in his grasp, and the disintegrated straw tumbled to the ground.

"There's a right way of doing everything," he remarked, "and I haven't learned how to do this."

"I'll attend to that part; you must keep on cutting the stalks," remarked the farmer, gathering up the straw, twisting it compactly, and knotting it about the upper part of the shock with a deftness that stirred the youth to admiration.

"I'm going to persevere until I get the right hang," remarked Ned, renewing his attack on the stalks with his knife.

When the next shock was large enough, he took some lessons under the eye of his instructors, and, after a number of efforts, succeeded in tying other obdurate stalks together. The farmer pronounced it perfect; but all the same, when Ned wasn't looking, the old gentleman slyly put another band around it. Inasmuch as the "new hand" persisted in keeping at work all the afternoon, Mr. Calkins provided himself with another corn knife from the barn and joined him, the three making good progress, which was enlivened by brisk conversation. Ned's soft hands showed the result of the unusual form of work when quitting time arrived.

There were blisters on the palms, and a little soreness in his right arm; but this was to be expected, and he was sure he would get over it in the course of a day or two. As the afternoon advanced, he kept hard at it, more hopeful and inspirited than he had been since leaving home; but toward the close of the day, he became conscious of a queer feeling growing upon him.

His injured face gave him no further trouble. The attention of Aunt Eliza helped it so much that the swelling was hardly perceptible and the pain wholly departed. But now and then a strange giddiness came over him. He was hot and chilly by turns; and the strong appetite, which began making itself felt during the afternoon disappeared, so that when he sat down at the supper-table he surprised his friends by accepting only a cup of tea, with the remark that he did not feel hungry.

"You started in too hard," observed the farmer; "you know you are not used to it; it will be best for you to take a rest to-morrow and be ready for the next day."

Ned felt as though he would almost give anything for the privilege of retiring to the clean, cozy bed that he knew was awaiting him; but he was unwilling to give up, or to deprive his friends of his company when he knew they counted so much upon it. It has been said, in another place, that he was a fine musician; and

when he asked to play the melodeon in the parlor, where a fire had been kindled, he charmed his listeners by his skill. He not only played, but sang some of those Foster melodies whose sweet pathos has never been equaled by any composer of this country. The instrument had been bought for an only daughter, who, after learning the art, died a couple of years before; and neither father nor mother had ever fully recovered, nor would they ever fully recover from the blow.

Without suspecting it, Ned sang one of her favorite hymns, "I would not live Alway," his rich, melodious tones filling the old house with a music it had never known since that gentle voice was hushed forever. When he concluded and looked around, both father and mother were sobbing like children, while Fred tried to hide his emotion by abruptly rising to his feet and hurrying out of the room.

"I'm sorry I made you feel bad," he remarked, touched by the sight of their grief.

By and by the mother found voice to explain, after which Ned sang a little while longer in subdued tones that stirred their hearts to the uttermost depths. It was sorrow indeed, but a sacred sorrow that they could not have exchanged for any mirth or laughter the world could give. The strain upon Ned Melton was greater than any of his friends suspected. Truth to tell, he was in such a state that he needed attention, and should

have gone to his bed without delay; but he would not confess that he was growing ill, and he felt under too deep obligations to his friends to withdraw so early in the evening. The time came, however, when he was able to hold out no longer. Suppressing as far as he could all evidence of his distress, he wheeled about on the stool, and pleasantly remarked that, as it was growing late, he would have to bid them good-night.

"You folks are in the habit of rising early," he added, "and you must call me when Mr. Calkins and Fred get up."

"You leave that to me," said the elder, in a tone which left considerable doubt about his doing as Ned had requested. Aunt Eliza scanned the flushed face of the youth suspiciously, as she handed a candle to her son and asked him to conduct Ned to his bedroom. She said nothing, however, of what was in her mind, until Fred rejoined them.

"He isn't well at all," she remarked in a low voice, as though afraid of being overheard.

"His face was flushed, and he walked unsteadily on his way to the room," said Fred.

"I hope it is nothing serious," observed the father with a sigh, "for he is the finest young man I ever saw."

"I hope not," added the wife, "but I feel uneasy about him; he isn't used to our way of living. Poor boy, with no father or mother! but if he is to be sick, I'll look after him the best I know how."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NED MELTON was right in believing that his friends were accustomed to rise early. It was rare that they were not astir, summer and winter, long before the appearance of the sun. Aunt Eliza was never the last to leave her couch, that distinction generally falling to the lot of big Fred, though he was only a few minutes tardy. But the good woman's uneasiness caused her to rise even earlier on this occasion than was her wont. Candle in hand, she made her way to the room of Ned Melton, where she knocked softly. There was no response until she had repeated the summons several times. Then the reply was so odd that she shoved open the door and walked straight to the bedside of the boy. One glance was enough for those experienced and kindly eyes. Ned was not only in a raging fever, but was delirious. She placed her hand on his forehead and cheeks, and it seemed as if the touch would blister her fingers. She smoothed away the hair from the brow, and with a mother's yearning and tenderness leaned over and kissed him.

"Poor boy!" she murmured, "without father or mother; you were ill last night, but would not say so."

Ned looked at her in a strange, wondering way, his eyes staring and meaningless.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Where did you come from? What do you want with me? Did the tramps send you here?"

Hearing a step, the woman turned her head. Her husband and son were at her elbow. They, too, were solicitous for the youth who had won his way so quickly to their hearts.

"Fred, you must go for the doctor right away," she said; "he is very sick."

"What do you think is the matter, mother?"

"Fever — don't tarry on the way."

Little danger of the young man tarrying. Within five minutes he was astride the youngest and fleetest horse, without saddle, and tearing up the road like mad. Old Doctor Phillips had not yet started on his round of visits, but was about to do so, when Fred said he must come to their house without an instant's delay.

"It is fever, resulting from exposure, suffering, and probably some mental trouble. He is threatened with brain-fever; in fact, it's on him now, and he is going to have a tough time of it."

This was the diagnosis of the venerable physician, after examining the tongue, testing the pulse and temperature, and making himself familiar with all the symptoms. Aunt Eliza, her husband, and son stood by; for

they were too deeply interested to think of anything else.

"What's the prospect for him?" asked the young man, while the others listened breathlessly for the reply. The medical man shrugged his shoulders.

"It's too early to judge, but he has a good deal in his favor."

"What is that?"

"He is young, with the physique of an athlete, evidently has no bad habits, and must have enjoyed high health before this attack. In a case of this kind medicine can do precious little; it is nature that has to be depended upon. The nurse is the real physician, and this young man is lucky in having the best one in Bucks County."

Doctor Phillips had met Aunt Eliza at many a sick bedside, and meant all he said; he might have said with equal truth that it was impossible to find her superior as an attendant of the sick anywhere.

"That's true," assented the husband, who appreciated the treasure he possessed in his wife; "but what is it that is against the young man?"

"Brain disease is a dangerous ailment, and he has got it as bad as I ever saw it. I will drop in this evening and keep track of him. He needs little medicine; but, for a day or two, one of you men had better keep within call, for there's no saying what form his delirium may take."

Thus it came about that before Ned Melton had traveled a hundred miles from the city of New York, he was attacked with an illness that threatened his life, and indeed held his existence in equal poise for several days and nights. His exposure in the barn, when suffering for food, his mental disturbance, and possibly some remote cause beyond the reach of medical remedies, combined to assail the brain with a fierceness that would have carried off the majority of sufferers. But the doctor had shown clearly the vast advantages on the side of the youth, despite the violence of the attack. His own rugged strength, and the pure, healthful life he had always led, furnished a reserve of vitality beyond all value in such a crisis. But for them he would have succumbed beyond peradventure. Added to this, was the perfect attention he received at the hands of his new friends and the physician. The latter called regularly twice a day at first, and after a while only once, as the necessity ceased.

The memory of a portion of those days spent at the home of the good farmer will always be like a frightful nightmare to Edmund Melton. What pen can describe the wonderful fancies that run riot in the brain when it is fired almost to the bursting point by the flaming fever that hurls the blood through the arteries and veins until it seems that it must shrivel bone and muscle, flesh and nerve, with the consuming heat?

The time came, however, when there was a subsidence of these bewildering gymnastics of the brain, and the strong hand of the farmer or his son was no longer required to hold him in bed. There had been hours when, but for them, he would have leaped through the window in the dead of night, or run screeching like a maniac up the highway. But all that was past, and he was mending with the certainty of full recovery, unless some unexpected relapse or complication occurred.

One afternoon Ned was lying in bed, his head and shoulders propped against the pillows, and his senses half obliterated in a doze. He had shown glimpses of returning mental strength that day, and Aunt Eliza had at last dismissed all misgiving. She knew he was going to get well, and that before long he would recognize her. Suddenly the patient felt as though, after struggling below water for a long time, he had reached the surface and could breathe. He opened his eyes, dimly conscious of where he was, and suspecting what had taken place with him, when he uttered the exclamation, —

"Am I dreaming? Where did you come from? Is it you, Jim?"

"Yes, it is I, old fellow."

Two nights before, a carriage containing a single person drove up to the house of Farmer Calkins, and James McCutcheon alighted. He had succeeded in

tracing his friend to where he lay, struggling with brain-fever, and, making himself known, was admitted to his bedside.

Ned was far along on the road to recovery by this time, but was still unable to recognize his friend. The latter arranged to send the hired team back to Trenton, and then sat down to stay with the sick youth. He telegraphed the fact to Shipman & Gumbridge, and received in reply the announcement of the death of Colonel Bainbridge. Then McCutcheon wrote the full particulars of how he had found Ned, and the pitiful plight he was in, adding that he would not return home until he brought him with him. Nothing was said concerning the missing diamonds; for of course no conversation could be held about them until the youth was himself again.

McCutcheon had a hard time of it in explaining things to the good friends of the patient. Having learned what Ned himself had told, he added that he was too proud and high-spirited to depend upon any relative, and had set out to take care of himself.

"It was a foolish thing to do," he observed, "and he has paid dear for it. He will be twenty-one in less than two years, when he will have enough money to buy a farm for himself."

"I suppose he means to do that," remarked Mr. Calkins, "and concluded that he would learn the

business before investing. That was a sensible thing to do — just like the young man!"

McCutcheon repressed a smile, and thought it best not to disturb this beautiful but altogether fanciful theory.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Ned Melton, from his sick couch, looked fixedly at his friend a moment, and then extended his hand.

"I am glad to see you, Jim," he said, his pale face lighting up with his winning smile; "but it is a surprise to me. I have been sick for a good while."

"Yes; but you are coming all right now."

"What made you follow me here?"

"I have come to take you home."

The face of the invalid was darkened by a pained expression, and he shook his head.

"I am sorry, but you will be disappointed; I left home with the resolution to stay away until I become my own master. I cannot go back with you, after leaving my uncle as I did."

"But, Ned, your uncle is dead."

"What!" exclaimed the sick lad, rising to a sitting position in his excitement.

"There! I promised the doctor not to disturb you, and I am afraid I have been too abrupt. I should have waited."

Ned Melton sank back on his pillow, and, with his gaze still fixed on his friend, asked in a low voice, —

"Tell me how it was."

"Two nights ago he dropped dead in his library. He never spoke after sinking to the floor, and was beyond all help from the instant he was seized with apoplexy."

"I am sorry to hear it," said the youth tenderly; "but even though my uncle is gone, I cannot but feel that he was harsher than he should have been with me."

"There can be no question of that; you were hasty in leaving as you did, but who can blame you? You will now go home with me."

Ned lay for a moment looking up at the ceiling, as if in deep thought, then he said, —

"Yes, I suppose I may as well do so; I can now return to the store, and if Shipman & Gumbridge choose to raise my wages there is nothing to prevent. Is my uncle buried?"

"I presume he is, or will be before you can reach home."

"I should like to attend his funeral, but I am afraid I am hardly strong enough to travel."

"No; it will be several days before you can do that. In the meantime, you must get well and strong as fast as you can."

"Do the folks want me to come back to the store?"

"They sent me to hunt for you, and to say that all will be forgiven and made right if you will return."

"What do you mean by 'all will be forgiven,' Jim?" asked the sick youth, turning his head so as to look again into the countenance of his friend.

The latter flushed and showed embarrassment. They had reached the delicate subject sooner than he meant, and before he was prepared for it. Fortunately the doctor appeared at this moment. He expressed great pleasure at finding his patient doing so well, and declared that all danger was over.

"He must be careful for a day or two; don't excite him too much by conversation. Aunt Eliza will attend to him as only she can; I won't call again until to-morrow, unless I am sent for."

The good lady, her husband, and son were on the heels of the physician; and when they found Ned Melton in his right mind could not repress their delight. Fred sat down on the side of the bed, and passed his big rough hand over the white forehead; his father patted his shoulder; and Aunt Eliza, in her motherly way, touched her lips to the parched ones of the boy. As she did so, Ned threw both arms around her neck, and said, as the tears filled his eyes, —

"No mother could have been kinder than you; all through my fever, when glimpses of sense came to me, I saw your face, like that of an angel, hovering over me. I shall always look upon you as my mother. Fred, you ought to thank God every morning and night for such a blessing as she."

"I do!" was the fervent response of the young man, in his deep bass voice.

"There now!" smiled Aunt Eliza, patting his cheek; "it has been a pleasure to me to be what help I could; poor boy! without father or mother, who could have treated you ill?"

"I am thankful," said the husband, "that when you set out to seek your fortune you came this way; but," he added in his quaint manner, that caused all to smile, even Ned himself, "you have lost several days, and all the corn has not been gathered yet; we have left several rows for you to look after."

"I'm afraid I shall have to give up the hope of becoming a farmer," said Ned; "I don't seem to take hold right."

"You take hold well enough, and by and by will learn how to let go as you should."

"The best time to let go, I imagine, is now."

The conversation went on in this fashion for a while, when the doctor, as he rose to go, suggested that the patient, after taking some broth, should be left alone for a time. Aunt Eliza tucked him up, composing his limbs, and Ned sank into a slumber as sweet, dreamless, and refreshing as that of an infant. The room was darkened, and McCutcheon withdrew with them. He spent several hours with the farmer and his son, studying the mysteries of husbandry, and when they returned

to the house, later in the afternoon, found that Ned had just finished his slumber, and Aunt Eliza had seated him amid blankets and cushions in a big rocking-chair. Youth, vigor, and good habits were doing their marvelous work with Ned Melton. With a delicacy that did them credit, the Calkins family allowed the youths to spend an hour or two together that evening, knowing that they had considerable to say to each other which they would not wish to be heard by others. James McCutcheon had never wavered in his faith in the innocence of his friend as concerned the lost diamonds, but he felt that the time had come when the matter should be cleared up.

"Ned," said he, after they had chatted a while, "when you went away you left a note I believe for your uncle telling him why you did so."

"Yes," replied Ned, with an inclination of his head.

"Why didn't you leave one for Shipman & Gumbridge?"

"I did," was the response of the astonished youth; "didn't they receive it?"

"They did not, nor have they learned what you did with the diamonds you had with you at the time."

"Is it possible? I left a note on my bureau addressed to them, saying that I had decided to seek my fortune; that I could never thank them sufficiently for their kindness, and that the package of diamonds be-

longing to them would be found in a drawer of the bureau in my room, securely tied up, and with their address on the outside. Since I left late at night, I could not deliver them, nor did I think it best to wait until the next day, since that would have interfered with my plans."

"They never saw your letter, and therefore know nothing of the whereabouts of the diamonds. They would not believe you took them away with you; of course I have never had a misgiving on that score, though I could not understand what it all meant; and there were some, your uncle among the rest, who seemed to believe you stole them. Ah, if that letter had been delivered what anguish might have been saved!"

Ned Melton became thoughtful. He saw the net in which he had involved himself by his hasty action, but he did not suspect the whole wretched extent of the trouble. McCutcheon told him nothing about that shocking advertisement in the *Jeweler's Journal*, and the fact was kept from him for weeks, and until after an explanation had been published to the effect that a woful mistake had been made, by which the gravest injustice was done a wholly innocent person.

Fearful that the confusion caused by the death of Colonel Bainbridge might jeopardize the safety of the diamonds, McCutcheon deemed it best to notify his employers at once. Accordingly he was driven to the

nearest town, whence he sent a long dispatch to Messrs. Shipman & Gumbridge, explaining what he had learned, and asking them to take the necessary steps to recover their property. The young man added a request that they would wire him the result. Messrs. Shipman & Gumbridge received this important dispatch on their return from the funeral of Colonel Bainbridge, and, as may be supposed, were greatly moved by it. They took a cab and drove to the stricken house without delay. When they explained so far as necessary their errand, those in charge courteously offered them every facility required. On opening the third drawer of Ned Melton's well-kept bureau, the first thing on which their eyes rested was a sealed note bearing their address. When they opened it and read the contents, it was hard to restrain the emotion caused by reading what the writer meant for his last words to them. In one corner of the same drawer was found the package of diamonds intact, without one being missing.

"The boy would have starved to death before taking any," was the truthful remark of Mr. Shipman.

"There is no question as to that; but was there ever stronger circumstantial evidence of one's guilt?" remarked his companion.

The most charitable construction as affecting the dead Colonel Bainbridge was put upon the matter. He must have seen the note addressed to the jewelers,

but in his anger refused to deliver it, thus bringing about the sad misapprehension that had prevailed from the first. They would not believe that he knew the gems were in the same drawer at the time he advertised the reward for the arrest of his nephew; but this belief was a stretch of charity in which no one, not even Ned Melton himself, could follow them.

On their return to the store, whom should they find but Detective Blowitz, just come back from his trip to the South-west, with a report of the fool's errand on which he had been engaged! He acknowledged his mistake, but insisted, what any person must concede, that he was justified in doing all that he did. He listened with an interest that may be imagined to the story which the jeweler told him. He rejoiced fully as much as they that the suspected clerk had emerged from the furnace without so much as the smell of fire on his garments. The next thing to do was to prepare a statement for the *Jeweler's Journal*, explaining the dreadful mistake that had been made, and which statement, of course, that excellent and fair-minded journal gladly published in a conspicuous place in the paper.

The next step was to send James McCutcheon the following dispatch, which promptly reached its destination: —

"The diamonds have been found where Edmund left them, and are now in our possession. Everything is satisfactorily explained.

We congratulate Edmund and yourself on the happy issue of the business. We trust that he is rapidly recovering from his illness, and that we shall soon see you both in New York.

SHIPMAN & GUMBRIDGE."

Farmer Calkins and his family could not help feeling a natural curiosity over the telegrams and the long conferences between the two guests at their house; but their native delicacy restrained all questions, and McCutcheon was able to explain matters to their satisfaction. He said that young Melton's departure from home was through a mistake, and that he had decided to return with him now that everything was adjusted. An excellent situation had been promised him, and he would assume it as soon as his health was fully restored.

Three days later the two young men bade their friends an affectionate good-by. The farmer absolutely refused to receive any compensation for the invaluable kindness he and his family had shown, insisting that the pleasure of entertaining such a youth as Ned Melton more than compensated them. All that they asked was that the lads should not forget them, but make them a visit whenever they could do so. The promise was not only gladly given, but is maintained to the present day and will doubtless continue through life. Ned persists in calling Aunt Eliza "mother," and she is as happy over being regarded as such as when her big boy Fred addresses her by that sacred title. However,

Ned and James were not to be baffled by the refusal of the excellent family to accept money for what they had done. During the few days of convalescence, McCutcheon quietly informed himself as to what was likely to be the most acceptable to them, and they did not forget it on returning to the metropolis. Fred Calkins was quite a sportsman, being fond of hunting through the woods whenever he had the chance, for the small game which is quite plentiful in that section of the country. On those occasions he carried a single-barreled, old-fashioned shot-gun, worth very little; and he innocently remarked one day that as soon as he could afford it he meant to purchase a better weapon. He has never done so, for the reason that one of the finest and most costly weapons of modern make reached him a few days later, with the expressage prepaid, and a note, begging him to accept it with the compliments of Ned Melton and James McCutcheon, and to come and see them as soon as he could. The young man was so overcome, that he straightway donned his best suit, and took the train to New York to thank them in person. He wanted to carry the gun with him, just to make folks jealous; but his parents persuaded him that it would hardly be in good taste, and induced him, much to his regret, to leave it at home. He intended to stay one night in the metropolis — that is, if the boys urged him to do so; but it was nearly a week before

they allowed him to return, and they treated him so royally that he was nearly ruined. He emerged, however, all right, and was allowed to go home on the pledge that he would visit them again, and as often as he could make it convenient to do so.

"And here's something for you, mother," said the son, depositing a huge bundle on a chair.

"Why, what is it?" asked the old lady, adjusting her spectacles and leaning forward, with never a suspicion of its nature.

"I guess you'd better look for yourself."

She unrolled a package of the finest silk, more than enough to make her a dress, with the trimmings which accompanied it.

"Well, I declare!" she exclaimed, dropping back in her chair, faint, and almost breathless; "who would have thought it?"

"I saw Ned buy it," added Fred, "and b'gosh, he paid eight dollars a yard for it at Lord & Taylor's. He wouldn't take anything but the best in the place, and he told me to say to you that you must have it made up right away, by the best dressmaker you can find, for he's coming out to see how it fits."

"Bless the heart of my dear boy! I never expected anything like that; but I'm afraid that his extravagance will ruin him."

"Don't you worry about *him*. Now that his uncle is

dead he has plenty of money, and when he becomes twenty-one he will be a rich man — O father, I like to have forgot you! Ned told me to say to you that he thought you was too good-looking a man to wear that bull's eye watch which was left you by your grandfather, so he took the liberty of sending you this timekeeper; she's a hummer, and there isn't a better one in their big store."

There it was, a magnificent gold chronometer such as a millionaire might have been proud to wear. The recipient turned it over in his hand, listened to its ticking, held it off and then close to his face, carefully opened and inspected the dazzling interior, and at last found voice to exclaim with a happy sigh, —

"Well, I'll be hanged, if it doesn't beat everything!"

FEB 9 - 1950